Relationship-Building Strategies for the Classroom

Educator-student relationships are key to student success at school. In order to build relationships, educators must take an intentional approach to ensure all students and families feel heard and seen in their classroom. Strong educator-student relationships are a key part of Tier 1 practices that create positive classroom environments (Rose, Leverson, & Smith, 2019). Furthermore, positive educator-student relationships are foundational to implementing trauma-informed practices (NCTSN, 2020). Having trusting relationships between adults and students can help increase student motivation, encourage self-efficacy, and improve academic achievement. Additionally, students with strong adult relationships reported increased peer relationships (Regional Education Laboratory, 2018). The following brief describes 10 strategies that educators can use to help strengthen relationships in their classrooms both in person and virtually. To learn more, visit OSSE's School Climate and Culture website.

Strategy	Why Do It?	How to Do It?	Further Resources
Greeting at the Door *A classroom practice that focuses on welcoming each student by name both in person and virtually.* Age Range: All grade levels	Greeting students as they enter (or exit) your classroom is a simple and effective way to create a welcoming classroom and build positive relationships. Being greeted by an adult who is happy to see them can start a student's school day on a positive note. Likewise, an affirmative interaction at the end of the class can end student's day on a positive note as well. Research has shown that positive greetings at the door increases students' time on task, reduces disruptions, and builds positive relationships (Allday & Pakurar, 2007; Cook et al., 2018).	**In person:** 1. Stand just outside or inside of the door 2. Greet each student by name 3. Have a short, positive interaction (e.g., praise, friendly comment, question) 4. Direct them to the first activity **Virtual:** Although there may not be a physical door, in the virtual classroom educators can welcome each student verbally or nonverbally to ensure they feel seen and valued. Educators can use a check in routine, set up a do now procedure, or assign different student greeter roles in the classroom to ensure that each student gets recognized in each synchronous session. In asynchronous sessions, educators can welcome students by name in the recording.	• [Greetings at the Door Guide](#)
Community Circles *A classroom practice that emphasizes predictable, structured open dialogues between students and adults.* Age Range: All grade levels	Community circles are a key component of restorative justice and a powerful tool for relationship building. They allow all students to be heard and belong to the classroom community at large while equalizing the power between teachers and students. The circle is a structured dialogue process that allows students and adults a chance to share. Every circle is different, but each has the following components: opening ceremony, centerpiece, values/guidelines, talking piece, guiding questions, and closing ceremony. Community circles focus on learning more about themselves and their classmates.	**In person:** Before the community circle, plan your guiding questions and talking piece ahead of time. To set up a community circle, organize chairs in a circle with your centerpiece in the middle. To start the circle, review the agreements and start with a low risk check in question that leads up to the main question of the circle. End the circle with a check out and closing. **Virtual:** Although there is no physical circle, a virtual circle contains the same components. Ask students to bring their own talking piece to the virtual circle and plan your questions ahead of time. At the time of the circle, review the agreements and provide a visual of the order of students in the circle on the screen. Sharing the questions visually and allowing participants to answer via chat can increase access for all students.	• [Circle planning guide](#) • [Core processes of Restorative Justice Circles](#) • [Virtual Community Building Circles Resources Padlet](#)

Listening Deeply *A classroom lesson to help all students feel heard by educators and peers.* Age Range: Grades 6-12	Listening is a key skill for relationship building. As a teacher, we want to allow students chances to learn and practice the skill of deep listening and understand the positive effects of being listened to. This strategy supports the development of social-emotional skills and competencies as well as leading to deeper content engagement.	**In person:** After scheduling the lesson, allow students to reflect on anchor charts in the room for the key components of active listening: body language, focus, and expressing empathy. After discussing these concepts, model listening deeply with a student or adult in the class. In the next lesson, pair students up to practice being the speaker and listener with a clear prompt. Then, use the reflection questions to have students explore experience individually or with a group. **Virtual:** After scheduling the lesson, allow students to reflect on a Jamboard or Padlet on the key components of active listening: body language, focus, and expressing empathy. After discussing these concepts, model listening deeply with a student or adult in the class. In the next lesson, pair students up to practice being the speaker and listener with a clear prompt. Then, use the reflection questions to have students explore experience individually or with a group.	[Listening Deeply Guide](#) [The Value of Active Listening](#)
Relationship Mapping *An activity that connects one adult to every student in school* Age Range: All grade levels	This reflective process helps identify students who do (or do not) have a positive relationship with an adult at school. Having a trusting and deep connection with students increases a sense of belonging in the school community, reduced bullying, lower drop-out rates, and improved social and emotional capacities. This tool allows staff to inventory their relationships and create an action plan to ensure all students feel a sense of belonging.	**In person**: This activity would ideally take place at the beginning of the school year (October). List student names on chart paper/white board. All staff members should review the list of names and place a yellow dot to the left of the name if they have a positive relationship with that student and a red dot to the right if the staff member believes the student is at-risk personally or academically. Staff would reflect on what connections need to be made and what risk factors they need to consider. A follow-up should be scheduled approximately four weeks after to check if connections were made with identified students. **Virtual:** Consider using a protected Google/Excel spreadsheets to list the students' names. Ask staff members to respond and use a coding system next to the names. Staff can meet as a whole or by grade-level teams.	[Relation-ship Mapping Guide](#) [Virtual Relation-ship Mapping Resource](#) [Video: Make sure every student it known](#)

2x10 Strategy *A quick practice to help build relationships with students who are hard to reach* <u>Age Range:</u> All grade levels	Challenging behavior may be an attempt to communicate a need for trust and connection. Giving non-contingent time and attention to an individual student can build the foundation of a trusting relationship. This strategy can also be based on function-based thinking, addressing the need for adult attention.	**In person:** Develop a system in which you build in time to spend two minutes getting to know a student, such as before or after class, during breaks, or when there is less direct instruction. Use data to identify which students you will use this strategy with as well as a way to progress-monitor the impact of this intervention. Conversations should be casual and centered on his/her interests in order for the strategy to be effective. **Virtual:** The two minutes can be done by phone or virtually before or after instruction begins by messaging the student privately on chat.	• [Article on 2x10 implemen-tation](#) • [2x10 Guide](#)
Equity Audit and Reflection *A list of questions that allow teachers to reflect on whether they use culturally responsive teaching in their classroom in order to ensure equity* <u>Age Range:</u> All grade levels	It is important to give teachers the time to reflect on their interaction with students in order to promote an equitable classroom environment. Are students engaged and do they have a voice in the classroom? Do they feel valued? By answering specific questions, teachers can think about ways to nurture classroom community and be culturally responsive to the students they are serving.	**In person:** After a whole group discussion about equity and culturally responsive teaching, teachers can answer the questions individually. Then, ask teachers to share and reflect in pairs. As a follow-up, encourage partners to observe one another and provide each other feedback. **Virtual:** These activities can easily be done in a virtual setting, using break out rooms to reflect in pairs. Teachers can pop into another teacher's virtual classroom to observe and provide feedback.	• [Learning Justice Relation-ship Questions](#)

Student Advisory Committee (SAC) *A structured avenue to convene students to advise on school policies* Age range: All grade levels	To build authentic relationships, students must see that their opinions are considered in their educational experience. A student advisory committee can ensure this happens by letting students lead conversations about creating a better schooling experience. Students benefit from the opportunities to practice problem-solving and leadership required to participate in decision making.	**In person:** Create a committee of student volunteers from various grade levels that represent the demographics of your school. Make sure to include students who may not traditionally be included. Start by having students provide feedback through focus groups on various issues that they can work with teachers and school leaders to improve school policy and decisions. **Virtual**: Create a virtual SAC with the goal of improving and evolving virtual programming to best serve the needs of students.	• Student Voice Chapter Building Guide
Family and Student Surveys *Questions and prompts that gather useful information about students and families in your class* Age Range: All grade levels	By collecting parents'/students' information as well as opinions and perspectives, educators can use it to inform their teaching strategies while also letting each student and family member know that they are valued.	**In Person:** Develop questionnaires at the beginning of the year using parent- and student-friendly language. Use trust building questions as a means to establish relationships and communication. Make sure to follow up on what you learn to ensure students and families see that their voices matter to you. **Virtual**: Consider using Google forms or other easy survey distribution tools. Promote during family engagement events or social media platforms.	• Beginning of the Year Relationship Building Toolkit
Behavior Specific Praise (BSP) *A form of reinforcement that helps positively build relationships and trust* Age Range: All grade levels	BSP is a quick strategy that educators can use to increase positive classroom climate and prosocial behavior. BSP focuses on providing clear feedback to students that is related to the behavior expectations or values of the community and school. This can increase time on task and decrease the need for error correction.	**In person and Virtual:** BSP is most effective when it is immediate and nonjudgmental. When delivering BSP make sure to consider the students' preferences of receiving attention (e.g., privately, publicly, in writing, verbally). To deliver BSP: 1. Identify the student by name 2. Recognize the student's effort by focusing on a specific behavior 3. Acknowledge the outcomes, results, or connection to expectations. For more information on setting up classroom systems, check out OSSE's asynchronous training: Positive Behavior Supports for the Virtual Classroom.	• Behavior Specific Praise Guide • Behavior Specific Praise Examples and Non-Examples

Circle of Concern	The circle of concern strategy aims to help students and adults reflect on their assumptions and stereotypes individually and as a group. To do this, students reflect on the people in their circle of concern and people outside of their circle of concern. Educators and students can have a conversation about the characteristics of the people inside their circle of concern and how to expand their circle to people who may have different identities than themselves. This activity builds bridges both inside and outside the classroom.	**In person:** Start by having a discussion with students about defining a circle of concern by using an anchor chart with a drawing of a person encompassed by a circle. Then draw a second circle showing those people outside of your circle of concern. Next, students will use concentric circles to reflect on their circle of concern and those not currently inside their circle using a graphic organizer. After students reflect on the commonalities between those in the circle of concern and those outside of it, have students think about actions they can take to be more inclusive to people outside of their circle of concern. **Virtual:** Using a virtual white board, model defining the circle of concern. For students who will be completing their circle of concern virtually (either on Padlet, Jamboard, or a Google Slide template), ensure that students' privacy is protected by having students create a copy of the document for their own reference. Have students reflect on their circles and how to safely include different groups of people in their circle.	• [Circle of Concern Guide](#)
From Making Caring Common, *a classroom strategy to build empathy and understanding in adults and students.* Age Range: 6-12 grade			

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