

## I-5: Create a welcoming environment

### Hold Community Meetings

Set aside time for daily or weekly meetings to create a safe, respectful place for communication. Teachers who think class meetings take too much time away from academic learning forget how much time they waste every day handling discipline problems, which could be handled more effectively in class meetings. The following steps were created for an elementary classroom, but can be adapted to a high school classroom as well.

#### Steps to Implementing Community Meetings (By Sara Cotner, a Louisiana elementary school teacher)

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##### 1. Create Buy-In

If students are invested in an activity, they will approach it with enthusiasm, diligence, and a sense of purpose. If un-invested, they will approach the activity with resistance and a negative attitude. (In the elementary classroom, the teacher's enthusiasm is often sufficient to excite students.) As the chief marketer in your classroom, you are responsible for creating the necessary buy-in for wholehearted student participation. Present the community as something special—something they are now mature enough to participate in.

*Sample activity to illustrate various benefits of community meetings: Decision T-Chart*

The purpose of this activity is to convince students that they are already decision-makers and to explain that community meetings teach people how to make good decisions for themselves. Reiterate that good things happen to students who make good decisions for themselves. This activity can be done individually, in partners, in groups, or as a whole class (or a combination of those groupings). Create a T-chart and ask students to brainstorm a list of all the things adults tell them to do. For example, adults might tell them when to go to bed or to finish their meal before they eat dessert. Then have students brainstorm a list of all the decisions they make for themselves (e.g. who to play with on the playground). Finally, help students to see that even when adults tell them to do things, they make a choice about whether to obey or disobey. The idea is to get students to see themselves as decision-makers.

##### 2. Create an Agenda Poster

Post the format of the meeting to give students a sense of control and empowerment. The poster lists what will happen next (so students can find their own answers) rather than having to ask the teacher. Keep the specific community meeting agenda on a small whiteboard, since issues and upcoming events change daily.

###### A Sample Agenda

1. Encouraging Words ("Thumbs Up")
2. Follow up on prior solutions
3. Announcements
4. Issues
  - a. Share feelings while others listening
  - b. Discuss
  - c. Ask for problem-solving help
5. Upcoming events (field trips, parties, projects)

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### 3. Practice Forming a Circle

The circle is the foundation of a good community meeting, and can be formed with chairs or on the floor. Establish and reinforce expectations for circle forming. Depending on the arrangement of your room, you may need to move desks to make space. Therefore, students should be able to form a circle quickly, quietly, and safely. The circle is not complete until everyone is a part of it.

*Sample activity to invest students in the formation of their circle ("Brainstorm"):*

The purpose of this activity is to empower students to find their own solution to forming a circle in the most efficient and effective way. Elicit ideas from students, and list these ideas. Once the students have voiced their ideas, review the list according to the following criteria:

- Does the idea allow us to create a circle safely?
- Does the idea allow us to create a circle quickly?
- Does the idea allow us to create a circle quietly?

Once the best idea has been selected (either through elimination, consensus, or vote), ask the students to try it out and time the process. Afterwards, allow the students to reflect on the process. What worked well? What needs to be changed? Continue practicing until the class is satisfied with their time. Like with any procedure, your students may need to practice it periodically throughout the year to ensure that they continue to make the best use of their time.

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### 4. Practice Encouraging Words

Encouraging Words (e.g. "Thumbs Up") are a good first agenda item for a community meeting. They foster a feeling of acceptance, appreciation, and self-worth among students. They also encourage the development of communication skills and create a positive atmosphere.

*Tips for Practicing Encouraging Words*

At first, students tend to give general praise, such as, "I want to give Keilan a thumbs up for being nice."

- Challenge students to give more specific praise, such as, "Keilan is nice because she let me borrow a pencil."
- When you notice students treating each other respectfully throughout the day, remind them to give a thumbs up during community meeting. Receiving positive reinforcement from peers is a definite way to ensure that the good behavior continues.
- Your first community meeting can simply include forming a circle and exchanging encouraging words.
- You might not want to discuss issues until the students have learned the basic components of problem-solving.
- Having the students hold an object while they speak reiterates the idea that only one person should speak at a time. It also tends to make the quieter students more confident when they have something tangible to hold. (A ball works well because it can be passed quickly across the center by rolling it.)

### 5. Create a List of Issues

A list of issues is the crux of the community meeting. Through the discussion of their own issues, students become more aware of the fact that their behavior is a choice. They are empowered to make decisions for themselves that lead to positive consequences. They begin to understand the rationale beyond their choices and the emotional context that pushes them toward certain actions.

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### *Role-Playing to identify student motivation*

Students should understand that certain decisions are the result of negative motivations. For example, students might misbehave for any of the following reasons:

1. They want attention
2. They want power
3. They want revenge
4. They feel insecure

The purpose of this activity is to enable students to identify the underlying motivation guiding individuals' actions. First check for student understanding of each category of misbehavior. Then pass out the role-playing cards to volunteers. They enact the scene, and the class decides whether the misbehavior was because the individual wanted attention, power, or revenge or because the individual felt insecure.

### *Benefits of an Issues List*

Although daily community meetings take time away from the academic subjects in the short-term, they actually save time in the long-run.

1. Efficiency. They allow you to continue teaching instead of being interrupted to deal with an issue. For example, if the class returns from recess and a student complains about an argument with another student, you can simply add the issue to the agenda and commence teaching. It is much more efficient to consolidate all of the issues and discuss them at one time. Students feel validated because their concern is added to the agenda, even if you don't immediately address it during their learning time.
2. Decreased Misbehavior. Using community meetings to resolve discipline issues is likely to reduce the number of discipline problems. Students are much less likely to misbehave when they are empowered to analyze their own behavior and when their peers hold them accountable for that behavior.
3. Empowerment. When students come to you to "tattle" on another student, ask them if they would like to put the issue on the community meeting agenda. Soon, they will come to you requesting to add an item to the agenda. To further empower students, let them add the items themselves (for example, in a notebook or on a clipboard).

## 6. Teach Active Listening Skills

Before students can discuss issues, they must learn to really listen to each other. They must internalize the five components of active listening (which they can generate themselves using a T-Chart of what active listening looks and sounds like):

1. Do not talk.
2. Keep hands still.
3. Look at the speaker.
4. Sit up straight.
5. Concentrate.

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### Active Listening Skill-Building Activities

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|-----------------------|--|
| Active Listening Song | <p>The purpose of this activity is to help students internalize the five components of active listening. The song is to the tune of "I'm a Little Teapot":</p> <p><i>I'm an active listener, see me look.<br/>My hands are folded in my lap.<br/>When someone is talking, my mouth shuts.<br/>I sit up straight and concentrate.</i></p> <p>The students also enjoy adding hand motions.</p>   |
| Talk Together         | <p>The purpose of this activity is to illustrate that only one person should speak at a time to ensure that everyone feels listened to and can communicate their ideas effectively. Give students the signal to begin talking at the same time. After a sufficient amount of time, allow students to think about how they felt during the experience. Then ask students to share with their partners how they felt. Finally, ask volunteers to share with the entire group.</p>                            |
| Raising the Roof      | <p>The purpose of this activity is to illustrate the importance of keeping hands still and concentrating during active listening. Select one volunteer to talk about a personal experience (e.g. what they did last weekend or what their favorite animal is and why). While the volunteer is talking, the other students should raise their hands and wave them in the air, as if they are eager to share their own experiences. Then ask the volunteer to express how s/he felt during the activity.</p> |
| Partner Talk          | <p>The purpose of this activity is to give students practice with active listening. Give each partnership a topic to discuss. Sample topics include: Should students be required to wear uniforms? Why or why not? What is the best holiday of the year? Why? Then ask one partner to share with the class what the other partner said. Ask the first partner to discuss how well the partner listened to and repeated their ideas.</p>  |

### 7. Teach "I" Statements

"I" statements are a way of expressing one's feelings without blaming others. For example, instead of saying, "You hurt me," an "I" statement would be, "I felt hurt when you said those things about my mother."

"I" statements encourage students to recognize and admit their emotions, which is the first step to resolving conflict. They also prevent students from speaking to each other in judgmental ways. When you hear students start to blame others, challenge them to rephrase their words within an "I" statement.

#### "I" Statement Activity: "I" Statement Sampling

The purpose of this activity is to give students the opportunity to practice "I" statements. Put the "I" statement cards into a paper bag and pass it around the circle. Each person draws out a card, reads the statement to the class, and fills in the blank. A sample card reads: "I feel embarrassed when \_\_\_\_\_."

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Here are some real-life issues that were resolved in this Louisiana teacher's meetings:

| Problem   | Discussion   | Solution  |
|---|--|---|
| The whole class was trying to earn A's on the spelling test so they could earn a popsicle party. Kendric continually said, "I'm going to get an F on that test on purpose." | The class discussion revealed that Kendric was trying to get attention through negative means. Kendric admitted that he felt like nobody in the class liked him.   | The class decided to go around the circle saying nice things to Kendric. They even made up a cheer that we chanted throughout the day.  |
| Jerric frequently lost control of his anger in class whenever he got frustrated.  | The class listened to Jerric express how he felt leading up to these episodes. The class validated his feelings but then expressed the fear they felt whenever Jerric lost control of his anger.   | The class brainstormed ways to help Jerric control his anger (e.g. breathing deeply, counting to 10). Then they vowed to positively reinforce Jerric whenever he did control his anger.   |
| The class was having problems turning homework in.  | The students who were doing their homework held the other students accountable by forcing them to discuss the reasons why they weren't turning their work in. Then the students who were doing their homework discussed their strategies for getting their work done after school. | The students decided to write down each other's phone numbers so they could make homework reminder calls.   |
| Students were getting in trouble for talking in line, but they were merely apologizing for accidentally stepping on someone's toes.   | The students explained their side of the story. Then I explained that it was impossible for me to distinguish between chatting (which is not allowed in the halls) and apologies (which I want them to offer each other).  | The class decided to learn how to say, "I'm sorry" in sign language.<br><br>The class role-played this solution for practice.   |
| Students were doing little things to annoy each other.  | The class realized that students who annoy each other are probably seeking attention.  | The class reached a consensus on "What to Do If Someone Messes with You"<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ignore them.</li> <li>2. Give them the cut-it-out signal in sign language.</li> <li>3. Tell the teacher.</li> </ol> The class role-played this solution for practice. |
| Students were too loud during math centers.   | The class discussed how much they like math centers and how the elevated noise is due to their excitement.   | We agreed that they would self-regulate the noise. When the noise continued, we decided to do a day of bookwork instead of math centers.  |