

# Community Building Circles

Climate Connection is a monthly publication of the NYS Center for School Safety.



Last month, we shared statistics from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey indicating students with strong social connections had better mental health outcomes. Classroom Meetings and Restorative Circles are effective strategies to promote a sense of belonging and connection to others. Both are examples of circle processes that fall along a continuum from proactive to responsive.

## Circle Strategies for Community Building

### Proactive

When implemented regularly, Morning Meetings and Check-in/Check-out Circles help establish the circle process as the norm. Used as a Tier 1 strategy, students:

- feel welcomed and heard.
- explore collaboration and sharing.
- are motivated to learn.
- develop and practice social-emotional, academic and life skills.

Once established, community circles support connectedness and safety, empowering students to initiate circles when necessary to:

- address conflict and explore possible solutions.
- have open conversations about local and national concerns, such as community violence, racism and other issues that impact students.

### Responsive

Restorative Circles are an increasingly common tool for addressing student behaviors. When youth are familiar with participant expectations and the circle process, successful outcomes are more likely. Research indicates that Restorative Circles:

- repair harm.
- restore social connections.
- support a positive climate and school safety.

As part of a restorative framework, routine implementation of community building circles helps to promote a safe and supportive school environment, and builds social-emotional, academic and life skills. Follow the steps below to create a plan for implementation of community circles in the upcoming 2022-2023 school year.

## EXPLORE RESOURCES



Get started with this article from [Responsive Classroom](#) that provides an overview of the process, and another from [Edutopia](#) that suggests staff practice meetings to learn the process and experience the benefits. In addition, look within your school for expertise and advice. If a teacher regularly facilitates morning meetings or a group "check out" at the end of the day, encourage them to share their experience with all staff. Finally, develop a plan that aligns best with existing structures.

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## ESTABLISH NORMS



Start each meeting with a review of ground rules and structure. It is common for circles to begin with a greeting (to support belongingness), followed by sharing in response to a prompt (to encourage trust and community building), a group activity (to support learning and collaboration) and a closing message delivered by the facilitator. Visit our webpages to access [resources](#) and [videos](#) of helpful strategies and best practices.

Engaging students as leaders and active participants is key to the success of community circles. This includes providing students the opportunity to establish circle norms and expectations, identify topics, lead activities and provide feedback. Leveraging student voice and experiences will support the development of trust, empathy and respect, and empower students to share and learn.

## ENGAGE STUDENTS



Parents and caregivers are part of the school community and therefore, should have the opportunity to participate in community building circles specifically beyond disciplinary situations. Consider using community circles as part of parent education programming or during annual Open House. Experiencing circles first hand will help families better understand the process. It also send the message that their input matters and supports an inclusive climate.

## EDUCATE FAMILIES



In building a restorative framework, consider starting with less formal circle initiatives, such as morning meetings in primary grades and community circles during advisory period or study hall in upper grades. As you move toward the use of Restorative Circles to repair harm, be sure to seek professional development to understand the foundational elements of circle processes, such as the use of a talking piece and the option to "pass" if a person prefers not to share. It is encouraged to approach restorative practices from a trauma-informed lens that aims to create a safe environment for sharing and connecting. Proper training will support safety and intended outcomes.

## TAKE YOUR TIME

