



Infusing SEL Into School Culture

Teacher-led morning meetings help even the most challenging students participate and share

BY SARA HERTEL AND CHRIS WYLAND

“Mr. Wyland, I love coming to school!” Those were hard-earned words for every staff member at Madras Elementary in Oregon. The student who said them had experienced inconceivable loss; he fought his family and the school support team every day he walked through the schoolhouse doors. Luckily, an amazing teacher and school counselor were there to help the student through his grief, dysregulation, and learning loss.

As a school, we are excited by how far we have come in creating a safe, welcoming environment and recognize how much more work we have in front of us. We have focused on ensuring that we build a culture filled with love, structure, and support for every student. When students truly feel like they belong and are known in the classroom and school, they are willing to take the intellectual risks necessary to learn at high levels.

Creating that kind of environment is a never-ending journey. At Madras, our aspiration and perspiration are devoted

to ensuring that every student belongs. This is manifested in the school's culture, training, and structures, which have been designed to support students and staff. How does your school staff view a “challenging” child?

A Culture of Connection

School culture is revealed in what the adult staff believe, how they behave, and how they interact with each other and students. Listening to staff was an essential part of infusing social-emotional learning and strategies throughout the school day—and our teachers ultimately drove the creation of a system that helps them get to know students better.

Prior to installing schoolwide support structures and strategies for morning meetings, students weren't guaranteed that teachers would have social-emotional supports in place for every student in every classroom.

We believe students need to start their day with their emotional needs met. Students who feel a sense of belonging and feel loved and cared for will work hard intellectually for their teachers. Every morning, a small group of students has a “Breakfast Club” with our counselor and behavior specialist, in addition to a morning meeting in their classroom. These students have forged a bond with one another and the two staff members.

We also provided teacher-led professional development on calm-down corners, calm-down kits, and classroom morning meetings starting in the 2019–2020 school year. Calm-down kits include a squishy ball, glitter or liquid water bottle, noise-canceling headphones, and fidget toys. The calm-down space offers a list of breathing techniques and other self-regulation strategies and a timer. The total cost to create 30 calm-down kits and spaces was about \$300.

Meeting and Modeling

At the start of the 2021–2022 school year, an instructional coach and the principal modeled morning meetings. This was a chance to model messaging, group activity, and sharing exercises that help students feel included and comfortable participating. Our school was lucky to have seven new rock-star teachers to incorporate into the team.

Where building connections with students is concerned, the pandemic slowed progress. There were disparate online learning schedules, and student contact time was reduced for in-person learning. Regardless, Madras launched every school day with a morning meeting for students that helped them experience care and connection every day.

As students returned to full in-person instruction for the 2021–2022 school year, our team knew we needed to continue this. As with any school initiative, we strived to create accountability and ensure that every student and staff member was positively impacted. During and after the 30-minute morning meeting, primary teachers checked their classrooms for meeting participation, silence during announcements, the return of daily take-home folders, and whether students needed a positive check-in.

The check-in was suggested by a fifth-grade teacher for students who have met expectations but might need extra attention from an adult while the teacher moves on to core academic content. In intermediate grade levels, teachers use a similar red sheet to check binder organization, allowing students to get extra help if their binder is disorganized instead of waiting

for the frantic rush to find a writing assignment from the prior day.

These expectations were taught at the beginning of the year and reinforced daily by the teacher, other students, and the school support team. The idea originated from Solution Tree's Dr. Luis Cruz and was scaled to elementary school to be developmentally appropriate.

Staff Support

Madras Elementary has a counselor who teaches classroom guidance lessons twice a quarter, works with small groups of students, and performs individual check-ins and counseling. This year, we added a behavior specialist who focuses on check-in and checkout and provides breaks for students who struggle with self-regulation. Scheduled breaks are a proactive strategy to keep students from getting frustrated in the classroom and entering the "red zone." The same teacher reteaches academic behaviors to help students be successful in the classroom.

The Morning Meeting Book by Roxann Kriete and Carol Davis is the basic resource for every teacher on the team. Teachers continually adapt its concepts for greetings, games, get-to-know-you activities, and sharing to maintain high levels of student engagement. Teachers also refer to *80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades K–2* by Susan Lattanzi Roser and *80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades 3–6* by Carol Davis.

As our school team dived deeper into infusing SEL into the school day, we realized that we still have work to do to ensure the highest level of support for students and staff. In the intermediate grades, students will soon be able to volunteer to lead their morning meeting for the day; giving students ownership in the morning meeting process will empower them to share with their peers and allow the teacher to take a co-facilitator role.

As collaborative teacher teams work within the DuFour PLC model, our guiding coalition will do the same with social-emotional learning standards. This allows students, families, teachers, and counselors to gain clarity about this critical element of student learning. It is our hope that the continued perspiration helps other students love coming to school every day. ●

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The authors discuss "Supporting Students by Mastering Morning Meetings" on the NAESP Principal Podcast.

