



Care and Connection: Activities

Oregon Department of Education: Care and Connection Activity Ideas

The Oregon Department of Education is asking every school/school district to cultivate care, connection, and community-building. We encourage you to focus on building relationships and community, and creating welcoming spaces for everyone, recognizing that each person will have different needs. We all know that mental health is a cornerstone of a good education, and believe it's essential to help students and staff build relationships and make meaning of the experiences of the pandemic.

Many districts, schools and staff already have many activities in place to build care and connection. Feel free to expand on these ideas, and incorporate them into your daily practice throughout the year. We've provided a few examples that you can use below, and will continue to offer inspiration on the Care and Connection webpage. We invite you to create exercises and events that fit your school/school district's schedule to build cultures of care, connection, and community.

We ask school administrators to provide staff, educators and students with permission and ample time to build care, connection and community with you, with each other, and with students. The intention is to create safe and invitational spaces that allow each person to be where they are at any given moment, and to offer creative opportunities for them to explore their experiences.

Activities can be built into your school or school district's daily routines. Because we all have different ways of being, knowing, and expressing ourselves, it is important that these events be invitational and not required. Some students and staff may prefer silence to engaging in exercises, or may express themselves in a number of ways. Each person should be encouraged to choose their path, and express themselves in ways that make them feel safe and comfortable. Affirm that people are valued, understood and appreciated in all the ways that they participate, and that a little nervousness is to be expected. If needed, the Oregon Department of Education offers many resources for students, families and staff to help support mental and emotional health.

The following are some potential exercises, activities and events to celebrate Care and Connection at your school or school district:

Preparation

For Staff	For Students
<p>Create opportunities for staff to informally connect. Provide extra support and mentorship to staff and teachers who are new to the school community and/or the profession.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● “Buddy” program for teachers new to the school and/or new to the profession● Welcome breakfast/potluck lunch● Open forums/Q&As hosted by administrators for staff to ask questions and access support● Specific training/PD for staff on addressing the pandemic, recognizing the ways in which COVID-19 disproportionately affected BIPOC students in particular, and supporting staff and students in healing and recognizing their own strength and resilience● Other ideas you may have that work for your school/school district	<p>Create welcoming classroom spaces. Are there extra touches that can make your school spaces more welcoming?</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Send an email or text, or place a phone call, from an administrator to students asking what questions or concerns they have for the current year● Provide students with a packet of resources (school map, counselor contact information, helpline information, etc.)● Warm lighting● Inviting music● Colorful pictures/objects● Welcome signs● Name tags for desks● Other ideas you may have that work for your school/school district

“We welcome you” | Daily welcome

For Staff	For Students
<p>Using the same strategy created for entry screening, welcome each person who enters the school daily. Invite building administrators to greet each staff member at the door each morning.</p> <p>Regular informal, non-evaluative check-ins between administrators and staff.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Asking staff, "How are you feeling today?" ● Have cell phone / personal technology-free staff meetings ● Hold meetings in circles of chairs (so staff have more opportunity to feel engaged and connected) ● Clear, proactive communication between school board, school district, building administrators, and staff 	<p>Administrators welcome each student as they enter the school building daily. Teachers welcome each student at the classroom door at the beginning of each day or class.</p> <p>Consider creative strategies or gestures that allow students to express themselves (sounds, gestures, movements) that teachers can model. Some students may not seem eager or happy to be at school. Offer them extra time, space, and encouragement as they enter, and give them permission to not participate or to invent their own option if they choose.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High five or air high five ● Hug or air hug ● Dance ● Elbow bump ● Other ideas you may have that work for your school/school district

“We acknowledge you” | Frequently during the academic year

For Staff	For Students
<p>Create time, permission and space for staff to connect as frequently as possible via community exercises, groups and activities. Make space in staff meetings for connection, expression and appreciation.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ice breaker exercises ● Team building activities ● Recognition of simple acts of kindness ● Recognition of staff achievements and accomplishments 	<p>Devote time to developmentally- appropriate, voluntary relationship building exercises. Provide choices for students to use various mediums to express themselves.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Art ● Music ● Movement ● Creative writing ● Song ● Dance

For Staff	For Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reinforcement of school values and commitments to creating welcoming and inclusive spaces for all ● Offer opportunities for reflection on the pandemic or a certain topic of the day ● Encourage staff to lead professional development in their respective areas of expertise <p>Provide explicit, non-stigmatizing and normalizing recognition of the significant stress of the pandemic, and that it is OK to not be feeling OK. Make staff aware of available resources should they need additional emotional support.</p>	<p><i>Note: these activities will vary by school, school district and staff member</i></p> <p>Provide explicit, non-stigmatizing and normalizing recognition of the significant stress of the pandemic, and that it is OK to not be feeling OK. Make students aware of available resources should they need additional emotional support.</p>

“We appreciate you” | Frequently throughout the school year

For Staff	For Students
<p>Create time, permission, and space for relationship building, and the formation of smaller groups within school communities.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider taking time during these meetings to invite each person to offer a response to “What I would like you to know about me is _____” ● Encourage creative responses using whatever medium is most comfortable for the individual. ● Emphasize resilience/healing/renewal rather than “getting back to normal.” ● Create space and time for connections across grade levels, content areas, classified/licensed staff, etc. ● Destigmatize the need for additional care or support to manage personal or professional stress. 	<p>Create time and space for students and teachers to get to know each other.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider inviting students to participate in an exercise where they respond to the statement, “What I would like you to know about me is _____” ● Give students time and creative license to develop a response through strategies such as: art, movement, music, singing, sharing an item or idea. ● Invite students to choose how they express themselves including the option to remain silent. All forms of expression are welcome.

“We care about you” | Always

For Staff	For Students
<p>Relationships take time. Make certain to build time and opportunity for care, connection and community building during the school week. Create an “open door” policy where staff have the opportunity to connect with leaders and share ideas.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Principals can hold “office hours” once or twice a week to meet with school staff and address questions/see how things are going ● Staff are asked to meet each other where they’re at, recognizing that, like students, adults will have a range of reactions about full- time, in-person instruction 	<p>Develop “open door” policies and dedicated time when students can speak with their teachers, counselors, and other trusted adults privately, and connect with peers.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allow students to form prosocial clubs or groups where they can foster mutual interests, relationships, collaboration and community ● Reduce or waive participation fees for activities and sports ● Host regular sessions in which students can provide feedback to administrators and staff ● Regularly celebrate student accomplishments, both academic and personal ● Make certain that students are aware of, and have access to mental health services and supports.

“We value you” | Events/Activities

For Staff	For Students
<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Decorate the staff lounge area● Creating Calm Rooms where school staff can take time to care for their emotional well-being● Create a space for staff to share announcements, community events, shout-outs, etc.● Host food tastings to poll favorites among your staff (for something healthy, such as guacamole, salsa, hot sauce or hummus)● Invite staff voice and choice into activity and event planning	<p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Reframe some of your traditional school activities, like an ice cream social, as a Care and Connection events

If needed, the Oregon Department of Education has many [resources](#) for students and families to help support mental and emotional health.