

# AUTHENTICALLY CONNECT WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Use this toolkit to build caring relationships with students through welcoming routines, knowledge of their interests, and sharing your own story.

In partnership, PERTS (Project for Education Research that Scales) and Sevenzo have created a series of toolkits to support educators who are taking action in their classrooms.



# CONNECTIONS WE REMEMBER

*"I can still clearly remember times when teachers showed me they cared by setting high standards and then encouraging me to achieve them. My 12th grade history teacher, Mr. Awaya, encouraged students to come into his room during lunch to help us prepare for our AP History test. He also spent his lunch helping us prepare for the AP English test. One of the essays on the test was directly related to one of the prep sessions he held. He wasn't always happy, or positive, but he always encouraged us to do better.*

*My third grade teacher, Mrs. Koley made me feel smart and capable. She helped me develop a growth mindset, well before it was a thing. We often need to convince students that they are capable, and help them to set and reach challenging personal goals.*

*The things that matter most to your students might seem like the grade they receive or the things they learned to help them prepare for their future, but the one thing they'll be sure to remember is whether or not you cared."*

- [Marianne Asay](#), 5th Grade Teacher in Utah

# ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

*“Every child deserves a champion; an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”* - Teacher Rita Pierson

Hello! You’ve found this resource because you care about your students and are committed to creating a more caring and engaging learning environment. This toolkit can help you do just that. Inside you’ll find strategies, inspiration, and tools for **authentically connecting with your students**.

## WHAT YOU’LL FIND IN THIS TOOLKIT



Supporting research and essential definitions to help you deepen understanding of student choice



Three activities to try: (1) make it personal, (2) establish welcoming routines, (3) get to know student interests



A calendar template to chart student interactions, an activity adaptation, one educator’s story, and more



Ways to share feedback to make this toolkit even better

For teachers participating in the Engagement Project, this toolkit can help you respond to these Teacher Caring survey items:

- This week, my teacher treated me with respect.
- I feel like my teacher is glad that I am in their class.
- I feel like my teacher cares what I think.

Learn more and access project materials at:

<http://www.perts.net/engage>



# WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

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## Building relationships with students is essential for learning.

Research shows what we all know to be true: **the relationship between teacher and students significantly impacts student engagement, behavior, and learning** (*Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011*). A teacher who makes his or her students feel heard, valued, and respected shows students that the classroom is fair and they can grow and succeed there (*Wentzel, K. R., 1997; Murdock, T. B. & Miller, A., 2003; Wentzel, K. R., 1997*).

**Of course, creating these positive relationships is not always easy.** The puzzle for many teachers is not figuring out how to care *more* about their students—you likely already care about your students a great deal. The challenge is figuring out how to *genuinely and deeply connect* with students so they feel cared for, and finding the time to build these connections.

Research has identified a number of strategies teachers can use to reliably help students perceive that they care—even when teachers must set limits on behavior or challenge students to improve their work. In the section to follow, we discuss a number of research-based strategies for **communicating care to students**.



# CREATING A CARING CLASSROOM

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Getting to know your students is the first step in creating a caring and supportive classroom environment where students can learn. Research shows that even small things teachers do can help establish positive relationships with students. For example, teachers can:

- Welcome students when they come to class
- Ask about their interests outside of school
- Allow students to get to know you



## The Power of Conversation

Studies also suggest that students do best in a supportive, judgment-free environment. Low-achieving students especially tend to withdraw at times to “protect” themselves rather than fail and risk embarrassment (*Turner, Midgley, Meyer, & Kang, 2002; Ryan, Pintrich, & Midgley, 2001*). Having a personal conversation with a student—especially one who is struggling—can be a great way to build a relationship that will help the student feel more secure and better about their prospects in school. When students feel they can relate to their teacher, their engagement—and subsequently achievement—increases (*Connell & Wellbourn, 1991*). Read on for strategies to help you get started!



# MAKE IT PERSONAL

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Estimated time to complete: 20 minutes

## Consider the Research

To build a caring relationship with students, consider first what you might share with students to help them get to know you. Take a moment to review the examples below:

**READ | [Sharing Your Story with Students](#) |**

A blog about the impact of sharing personal tidbits with students

**WATCH | [Making it Personal](#) |** A short video highlighting how one teacher makes personal connections to build relationships with her students

## Reflect on Your Own

Take a few minutes to consider these questions and jot down your responses.

1. What influences and experiences have shaped who you are and how you teach?
2. Who are you outside of the classroom? What interests, passions, and values drive you?
3. Who created a caring classroom for you when you were in school? How did they do that?



# ESTABLISH A WELCOMING ROUTINE

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**Objective** | Create a supportive, welcoming routine that is authentic and helps establish your classroom as an environment of trust and respect

**Time** | We estimate that this activity will take 20 minutes.

## Materials

- ❑ A computer to watch videos and read a short blog
- ❑ A pen or pencil, and paper

## Gather Ideas

Before you begin, check out these great examples of how other teachers have approached their welcoming routines.

[Silent Start](#) | A short video about the benefits of a silent start upon entry to the classroom

[Morning Meetings](#) | A short blog about the benefits of the morning meeting with examples of best practices

[Welcoming ELL Students](#) | Strategies specifically for educators of ELL students

## Activity

Make a short list of what resonated about these examples. Would silence set the right tone in your classroom, or would an enthusiastic greeting get your students excited to learn?

Set a goal to **try one new thing** as part of your welcoming routine for the week. For example, one commonality in these examples is being present at the door. Try being present at the door each day, if that would be a new addition to your practice.

## Reflect

At the end of the week, take a moment to reflect on what you tried. How did students respond?



# GET TO KNOW STUDENT INTERESTS

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**Objective |** Get to know what your students are interested in outside of school

**Time |** We estimate that this activity will take 15 minutes for students to complete

## **Materials**

- ❑ Copies or online access to a student questionnaire
- ❑ Pencils for each student



## **Student Activity: Questionnaire**

This activity could be done at the start of the day, or as a transition.

Determine which student questionnaire you'll use. As a starting place, consider assessing student interests using a survey tool.

**Student Inventories** | These examples from Cult of Pedagogy are tailored to different grade levels, can be edited to meet your needs, and could also be copied to google forms for students to complete electronically.

Distribute the questionnaires to all students and allow them time to thoughtfully respond. Collect their responses.





# REFLECT ON STUDENT INTERESTS

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**Objective** | Reflect on what you know about them already, and create opportunities in your daily routines to connect with students around these interests

**Time** | We estimate that this activity will take 20 minutes independently, with ongoing practice daily

## Materials

- ❑ Paper and pencil for the teacher reflection

## Teacher Activity: Reflection

Complete following the student questionnaire

This simple activity was developed by [Don Graves](#), literacy educator, and has been shared with many educators over the years. As a follow up to students completing the questionnaire, complete this activity independently. It is best to complete this activity after the first month of school. Follow the steps in the next column to complete the teacher reflection.

## Reflection Exercise

1. Create a three-columned chart on a piece of paper or document on the computer.
2. In the left column, write your students' names in the order in which you remember them.
3. In the middle column, write down one positive thing about each student that doesn't have anything to do with school work.
4. In the third column, put a checkmark if you have talked with each student about this piece of knowledge.
5. For students you struggled to remember, or didn't know as much about, make a commitment to connect with them in the next few days.

*Adapted from Don Graves + Responsive Classroom, 2013*



# OTHER RESOURCES

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## **INSPIRATION | ARTICLES AND VIDEOS**

*Appropriate for all content areas and grade levels*

Begin to consider ways that student interests might be incorporated into lessons. Examples below!

[Relationship Building Guide](#) | A blog post from Cult of Pedagogy that outlines some easy-to-follow best practices for helping educators cultivate strong student relationships

[Student Interests as Resources](#) | A short piece full of great ideas for incorporating student interests in the classroom

[Cultivate Classroom Chemistry](#) | A short blog post with strategies for creating a strong classroom community beginning with arrival and extending to curriculum

[Build Rapport with Students](#) | A set of six simple strategies for building rapport with students



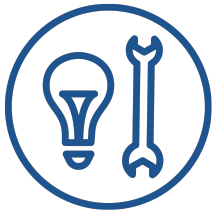
# CALENDAR OF INTERACTIONS

Use this template to identify opportunities for student interactions over two weeks

How might you incorporate opportunities for more 1:1 student conversation in your daily routine? Teachers who consistently reach out and engage students make a difference in their classroom experience. Consider using your class roster to tally your 1:1 student interactions over the course of a week or two.

Use this template to pencil in opportunities to connect with students. We know timing is a challenge, so be realistic! Maybe it's 2 minutes every day at the start of class to connect with different students, or picking one day each week to join a student lunch. Who might benefit from an opportunity to connect with you?

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY



# AN ADAPTATION

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## Get Students Involved!

*This adaptation could build on the student questionnaire, or be done as a lead-in icebreaker activity*

Consider Inviting your students to interview one another to allow them to build relationships with one another. You might provide sample questions as conversation starters and see what sparks their curiosity. Consider questions such as:

- Who is the person you look up to most, and why?
- Who is your favorite musician and why?
- If you could pick one place to visit anywhere in the world where would you go and why?

Choose an anchor question that resonates with you. Share your own response to model the activity, and then ask students to take a moment to reflect on their own response. Consider pairing students so they can get to know someone new. After peer interviews, incorporate a share-out that would allow students to share something they've learned about their partner with the class.

This adaptation offers lots of room for personalization and creativity, and could take as little as 10 minutes during a class transition. Students reflect on what they learned by sharing responses in their own journal, or collaborating with their partner to create a visual that could be displayed.



# EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT

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High school educator Kristin Van Brunt's personal story, [The Power of Relationships](#), highlights how the simple act of standing at her door between classes helped her connect with her students. Read an excerpt from her story below!

## **How do I build strong relationships with more than 200 students?**

A turning point came for me last year. Our new principal emailed the faculty and asked that we stand outside our rooms between classes to greet our students as they moved from class to class. My immediate reaction was annoyance. Those five minutes were priceless for me. However, I'm basically a rule follower, so I did as he asked.

## **From priceless time to invaluable opportunity for connection**

I stood outside my door and greeted students as they moved to their next class. I talked to my current students as they came in the door. We only had a few seconds, but it was enough time to ask Kendall if she had enjoyed the reading for the day. It gave Ashley a chance to ask questions about the writing homework on her way into class. In short, it gave me the chance to have a one-on-one connection with each of my students. The opportunity to build relationships with my students in that five-minute passing period has proved invaluable.

When I spend five minutes a day connecting with my students about their lives, they become more involved with what we are doing in the classroom. I've found that when students feel comfortable talking to me about things outside the classroom, they're more likely to discuss the questions they have about classwork as well. When we have a class discussion about the literature we're reading, the students are more likely to participate when they feel safe making a comment. The relationships we build help create that safe environment.

# INSPIRED? PASS IT ON!

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## Reflect and Share What Works

**REFLECT** | What surprised you about opening up to students? How did switching up your morning routine impact your day?

**DISCUSS WITH PEERS** | Talk to your peers about how you implemented this practice and share ideas.

**SHARE YOUR STORY AND INSPIRE OTHERS** | Come back to [sevenzo.org](https://sevenzo.org) to tell our community how you brought this practice to life. How did you adapt it for your class?

**GIVE FEEDBACK ON THIS PRACTICE** | Send us a message at [hi@sevenzo.org](mailto:hi@sevenzo.org) with your feedback so we can make the toolkit even better!

