

Establishing and Cultivating Relationships through Community Circles

*A Component of Restorative and Trauma
Responsive Practices*

Guidance for Richmond Public Schools
Teachers and Administrators

Introduction

RPS' strategic plan, *Dreams4RPS*, prioritizes ensuring *Exciting and Rigorous Teaching and Learning*. Yet in order to fully meet our academic vision for our students, we must also ensure that we achieve another priority of *Dreams4RPS* - *Safe and Loving School Cultures*.

School is more than just a place where teaching and learning occurs – it's also where our students find a group of caring adults to support them – physically and emotionally, and a place where our students' hopes and dreams are nurtured. And while we know all our school staff – whether that's teachers, principals, custodians, counselors, or countless other adults in the building - naturally teach, lead, and serve with love, there must be intentionality to relationship building and connection for it to have the greatest impact.

School culture and a student's ability to thrive academically are deeply connected. Consider the types of actions and behaviors you'd likely see from students when they are engaged in rigorous learning:

- Engaging in critical discourse about a complex text
- Working collaboratively in a group to solve a problem, complete a project, or engage in an experiment
- Taking responsibility for completing their work
- Taking ownership of their learning/owning the “cognitive lift”
- Persevering when they struggle with challenging content
- Praising their peers

The academic actions and behaviors listed above require students to have relationships with one another and/or have fluency with what are called “social-emotional competencies”. There are five core social-emotional competencies that have been defined by CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making* (see definitions below). [Research](#) tells us that when students engage in activities linked to these specific social-emotional competences they demonstrate “gains in empathy, impulse control, anger management, self-reliance, positive approach-coping, caring-cooperative behavior, suppression of anger, consideration of others, and social competence”. Additionally, social-emotional competencies are aligned with Virginia's Profile of a Graduate and the 5 Cs (critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, communication skills, collaboration skills, and citizenship skills).

As we think about ways to build skills, whether academic or social-emotional, we want to do so within the context of a relationship. Our students are incredibly resilient and come to us with countless strengths. At the same time many of our students are effected daily by systemic racism and the impact of trauma in their lives - things like possible unemployment of parents, housing instability, food insecurity, gun violence, social isolation, and more. And, for many of our students, this daily trauma has now been compounded by COVID 19. Relationships are key in helping our students navigate these challenges and ensuring their success.

When students have a deep connection with a caring adult at school, we see improvements in so many of the indicators that matter - increased attendance, improved graduation rates, decreased suspensions, and more. Therefore, one of the anchors of our work to ensure *Safe and Loving School Cultures* is to ensure safe and loving relationships with our students. Building relationships with our students certainly

isn't a new idea – and it isn't overly complicated. But this year in RPS, we're being incredibly intentional with our efforts.

The foundation of our relationship building work this year will be a **daily community circle** which ensures time each day in the classroom for the teacher to build, cultivate, and maintain authentic relationships with students, and between the students and their peers. Every RPS student will experience a community circle daily and they will occur at designated times at each grade band.

Let's think back to the actions and behaviors we'd expect to see in a classroom where rigorous instruction occurs – and consider the intersection each one of those actions has with the five social-emotional competencies. Take engaging in critical discourse about a complex text as an example. To do so effectively, one needs to have:

- *Self-awareness* (recognizing one's thoughts and their influence on behavior) – in a discussion about a text, this might be having a well-grounded sense of confidence to share one's ideas.
- *Self-management* (ability to regulate one's thoughts and behaviors) – in a discussion about a text, this might be motivating oneself to contribute
- *Social awareness* (take the perspective of others) – in a discussion about a text, this might be accepting opinions that differ from one's own
- *Relationship skills* (maintain healthy relationships) – in a discussion about a text, this might be listening actively to one's peers
- *Responsible decision making* (ability to make respectful choices about social interactions) – in a discussion about a text, this might be monitoring one's air time

Community circles will provide us the space for both relationship building and the explicit teaching of social-emotional competencies to ensure students achieve at high academic levels and as well as prepared to be contributing members of society.

Definitions of the Five Core Social and Emotional Competencies as defined by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

- **Self-awareness:** The ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism.
- **Self-management:** The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.
- **Social awareness:** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.
- **Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed.
- **Responsible decision-making:** The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety

concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others.

Community Circles – An Overview

What is the purpose of Community Circles?

Community circles are intentional structures that provide space and time in the classroom for the teacher to build, cultivate, and maintain authentic relationships between students, and between the students and their peers. Further, community circles help create a space in which all participants are safe to be their most authentic self, and therefore, serve as the foundation for building class and school community. Our ultimate goal is for community circles to be spaces where participants demonstrate respect, dignity, mutual concern, and ultimately create equitable and just learning environments.

Community circles are a key component of our Trauma Informed and Restorative Practices work as both center around building caring and safe relationships between teachers and students. When we say “restorative”, we specifically mean repairing harm that happens within a community but you can’t restore a community that hasn’t been built, cultivated and sustained.

How are community circles structured?

Community circles have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Community circles start with a mindfulness moment and a review of shared agreements. A prompt and sharing/discussion related to the prompt makes up the middle portion of the community circle. The community circle ends with two parts: an optimistic closing that reinforces positive messages articulated during the circle or reinforces a value, social-emotional skill, or connectedness, and a closing ritual which is established as a group.

Community Circles – Facilitation

What are some basic guiding principles for the facilitation of community circles?

During the community circle, the facilitator *guides* the discussion instead of *directs* the discussion. The facilitator encourages participation but participation in the circle is *always invitational* and participants always have the right to pass. Every participant is given an opportunity to speak and everyone has an opportunity to listen. It's important for the facilitator to actively listen and fully engage with what is being said in order to skillfully guide discussion and plan for the optimistic close. Finally, it is important to note that personal information shared in the community circle should remain confidential, except when safety is at risk.

In person (versus virtual) community circles often include a talking piece to support facilitation. The talking piece which is an object used to let people know whose turn it is to talk while everyone else listens.

What do I need to do as a facilitator to prepare for a community circle?

A facilitator needs to enter the community circle ready to facilitate and attentively listen – it's a best practice for a facilitator to engage in mindfulness activities prior to circle facilitation. The facilitator should also be aware of the energy of the group/classroom in order to make strategic decisions in the moment that keep the circle moving forward in a safe and supportive manner. Finally, the facilitator should have considered in advance the best way to review shared agreements, introduce the prompt, facilitate discussion, and close out the circle with a positive message.

The following is a checklist of things to look for as you reflect on your own facilitation of a circle:

- ✓ The community circle has a beginning that includes the mindfulness moment and a review of the shared agreements
- ✓ The community circle has a middle that includes a prompt and facilitated sharing
- ✓ The community circle has an ending consisting of an optimistic close and a closing ritual
- ✓ The facilitator remains encouraging and affirms participant comments
- ✓ The facilitator encourages participation but does not call on someone who has not volunteered to speak
- ✓ The facilitator remains focused on the speaker and listens attentively
- ✓ Everyone is given the opportunity to listen
- ✓ Shared agreements are reinforced when necessary
- ✓ The facilitator is prepared to lead the group through the prompt and discussion
- ✓ The facilitator makes appropriate adjustments when needed

This article also outlines seven steps for facilitating meaningful community circles:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/building-community-restorative-circles>

Different Outcomes for Community Circles

Community circles are our intentional way of providing space and time during the school day for teachers to build authentic relationships (whether between students/staff, students/students, or staff/staff), and build social-emotional competencies.

Building relationships takes time as trust is built over time. Therefore the synergy of each community circle will be different based on the group, and that means the implementation of community circles will lead to different outcomes at different times. Sometimes community circles build relationships through basic “get to know you better” prompts – and often this is how community circles begin at the start of the year as trust is built. These “lighter” prompts can also give a teacher good information on different students’ affect and if they are ready to engage in the instructional day (and then teachers can respond accordingly after the circle such as giving an individual student words of encouragement, having a quick one-on-one conversation with a student, or alerting a mental health staff member that a child might be in, coming out of, or going into crisis mode).

Over time, community circles may evolve to build deeper relationships by exploring deeper issues – and the facilitator will need to gauge the group to know if the trust is present to do so. Please note that daily community circles do not involve sharing of information that is best suited for a mental health professional to support.

Some community circles are called “restorative circles” – these are a special type of circle that assists students in repairing harm that has been inflicted on the community. RPS teachers will not lead these types of circles, instead, RPS mental health staff will do so if/when needed.

Community Circles – The Components

Community Circles in Action – Putting it All Together

Before digging into the different specific components of the community circle, it may be helpful to see one in action from start to finish. There are many videos that show community circles in action; here are the two you might want to start with:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdKhcQrLD1w>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oby3a-Rfkxs&t=232s>

Part 1: Mindfulness Moment

A mindfulness moment is a short (about 1 minute), distinct moment of stillness at the beginning of the community circle which refocuses participants from external distractions and makes the transition to the community circle space.

The mindfulness moment is based on mindfulness practices which include a variety of techniques for directing one's attention to the present experience and are designed to help participants to pay full attention to how their body and mind are responding at certain moments. Mindfulness moments are connected to all five social-emotional competencies and give the participants and facilitator the chance to practice while also providing coping tools that help them become aware of potential decision making triggers. Please refer to the Appendix for mindfulness activities (specifically breathing exercises) you can use). Additionally, we have created a library of mindfulness moments for reference.

Facilitators of community circles should consider practicing mindfulness moments prior to facilitating circles.

Part 2: Establishing (and Reviewing) Shared Agreements

Shared agreements are agreements that guide how participants in a community circle engage with each other. The shared agreements are negotiated by the participants and the facilitator. To initially establish shared agreements, facilitators should follow these steps:

1. Start with a quick prompt that serves as an icebreaker such as “What is your favorite (pick something)”.
2. After participants are given the opportunity (by invitation only) to share, explain to them that this type of sharing will occur daily as part of a “community circle.” Explain the purpose of a community circle is to build relationships and how this structure will become a daily part of the school day.
3. Explain that together (teacher and students) they will come up with shared agreements to ensure everyone feels safe participating in community circles.
4. Ask the students “what do you need from the others in the class so that you feel comfortable participating in community circles?” Write down student responses. Once you feel that students have had an appropriate opportunity to respond, read the responses back and categorize the responses that are similar in nature.
5. Finalize three to five shared agreements. In cases where there are more than five shared agreements, work with the students to prioritize.

Some examples of shared agreements include:

- We wait until the speaker is finished before sharing
- If we choose to respond to the speaker, we do so in a respectful way
- If someone chooses not to participate one day, we respect their decision
- We attentively listen to the speaker
- We speak and listen from the heart

Shared agreements of the community circle should be revisited at each community circle the first two weeks or school and then periodically reviewed with the group as needed. It's also important to note that depending on the group, shared agreements can change.

While shared agreements are negotiated by the teacher and the students, shared agreements should not be in conflict with community circles themselves. For example, since participation in the community circle is by invitation only (participation is optional) a shared agreement should not be that everyone will actively share.

Part 3: Prompts

Prompts are used to facilitate discussion among the participants of the community circle. The key to selecting an appropriate prompt is to move at the level of depth that feels right based on the synergy and trust present in the group. Please see the Appendix for examples of prompts to use with varying levels of trust and/or with explicit connections to social-emotional competencies. Teachers may also create their own prompts or find others via online research.

Part 4: Establishing Closing Rituals

The closing of the community circle has two parts. First, the facilitator should share an optimistic close that reinforces positive messages articulated during the circle or reinforces a value, social-emotional skill, or connectedness.

The second part of the closing is the closing ritual. A closing ritual is an established way to end the circle that affirms the efforts and the interconnectedness of the circle. Like the shared agreements, the closing rituals should be negotiated by the participants and the circle facilitator. To establish a closing ritual, facilitators should follow these steps:

1. Explain to the class that the goal of the closing ritual is to end the circle in a positive way.
2. Ask students "what do you need to happen at the end of the circle so you feel proud about participating?" (If the students aren't generating ideas provide your own examples such as closing the circle with a quote, poem, or daily affirmation).
3. Collect student responses. Once students have had an appropriate opportunity to respond, read the responses back and categorize the responses that are similar in nature.
4. Based on student ideas, generate a concrete way to close a circle. For example, if students want to close out the circle with an inspiring quote (but don't have a specific one in mind), the facilitator should find possible quotes or to empower students to find quotes.
5. As participants continue to build relationship with each other, the closing ritual may change (for example, moving from a poem to a whole group affirmation created by the group).

Some examples of a closing ritual include:

- A daily affirmation

- Everyone shouting something inspirational at the same time (think of athletes breaking the huddle)
- A poem
- Inspirational quotes
- Participants praising each other
- Determining one positive thing the class would like to accomplish over the course of the day

Community Circles Resources – Appendix

Mindfulness Moments

There are many types of mindfulness activities including visual focus, awareness of the body, and breathing exercises. Below you will find examples of several breathing exercises. Additionally you can watch members of the RPS community model mindfulness activities by accessing a Google Drive at:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1squx84e_R8gA9zAQbDXnUy1hUQ7KcXuk?usp=sharing

Breathing Exercises

- **(Belly)** Place your right palm on your belly. As you inhale through your nose fill your lower lungs and use your diaphragm to expand your belly like a balloon. Expand your belly slowly and as much as possible. Pause for a brief moment. Now exhale, leaving your hand in the same position, pulling your belly button to your spine. Inhale again, expanding your belly until it touches your hand. Repeat.
- **(Full)** Inhale deeply through the nose, using the diaphragm and expanding the stomach to fill the lower lungs. Then fill the middle lungs by pushing out the rib cage, breast bone, and chest. Then fill the upper lungs by poking out your chest to lift it and completely fill the upper lungs. Pause on the breath. Exhale slowly, relaxing and lowering the chest, breast bone, and upper rib cage. After the upper and middle lungs are emptied, slowly contract the stomach using the diaphragm to empty the lower lungs.
- **(Stress breath/ Darth Vader Breath)** Sit in an easy pose. Partially close the glottis (back of the throat). Inhale through the nose as deeply as possible and make your breath audible. Retain the breath, locking the chin to the chest. Raise the head up exhaling slowly while making the breath audible. Pause and repeat.
 - Note: Practice seated first, practicing standing can cause light-headedness when first starting. Feel free to exhale if retention is too long.
 - Note: Use your imagination when using this technique, seeing healing energy come into the body on the inhale, seeing that energy disperse through the body on the retention, and seeing negative energy leave the body on the exhale.
- **(Balance Breath)** Sit in an easy pose with your right hand at your nose, thumb by the right nostril and index finger by the left nostril. Cover the right nostril with your thumb and inhale through the left nostril. Cover both nostrils. Release the thumb then exhale through the right nostril. Inhale through the right nostril. Cover both nostrils. Release the index finger then exhale through the left nostril. Repeat.
 - Note: This can be hard to practice during cold and allergy season because of clogged nostrils.

For all exercises, remember to pause for a second after the inhale and for another second after the exhale. This will help keep the breath natural and help reduce the chances of difficulty in breathing. The breath should also be very smooth with no jerking motions.

Adapted from Yoga and Mindfulness for Youth Manual, Holistic Life Foundation (2019).

Prompts (for basic relationship building):

- What's your favorite...?
- What do you like about your best friend?
- What do you like about your favorite animal?
- At home, what do you like to do?
- If you could spend time with anyone in the world who would it be and what's one thing you'd want to do?
- What's your least favorite...?
- What do you like best about school?
- What makes you feel (choose any emotion)?
- When you become an adult, what do you want to be?
- If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?

Prompts (when foundational trust exists):

- What motivates you to be your best self?
- What brings you hope or a sense of possibility?
- What is something that you love about yourself?
- What's one thing that could happen this week that would make it an awesome week?
- Name one goal you've set for yourself this school year.
- What has helped you overcome a fear in the past?
- Tell us about a time you helped a friend or relative accomplish a goal/complete a task.
- What is one thing you want to finish this week?
- What is one thing you like to improve about yourself? Or one skill you hope to obtain in the future?
- What gives you peace?

Prompts Connected to the Five Core Social Emotional Competencies:

Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness (Identifying Emotions)

- On a scale of 1-10, how do you feel?
- Using a weather forecast, describe how you feel.
- Think about a positive experience you had recently and imagine yourself there again – How did you feel about the experience?

Self-Awareness (Recognize Strengths)

- What are some strengths others might say you have?
- What strengths do you have that you aren't using fully?
- Give an example of a time you helped someone else accomplish something.

Self-Awareness (Accurate Self-Perception)

- Describe a time when someone saw strengths in you that you didn't know you had.
- How does your image of yourself match how others see you?
- Describe a time when you surprised yourself with your own ability.

Self-Awareness (Self-Confidence)

- What are some important skills or knowledge that you bring to the table?
- Describe a situation when your self-confidence was shaken.
- What kind of situations are most challenging for you?

Self-Awareness (Self-Efficacy)

- Describe a time when you had a positive impact on a situation.
- Give an example of something that you feel very effective at, that others may not see.

Social-Awareness

Social-Awareness (Empathy)

- Recall a relationship or situation where your feelings were heard and taken into account.
- Describe a time when being aware of others' feelings helped you be successful.

Social-Awareness (Respect for Self)

- What do you admire about people who belong to the same identity group (e.g. age, race, gender, sexual orientation) as you?
- Describe something that makes you feel proud about yourself.

Social-Awareness (Respect for Others)

- What helps you treat someone with respect, even when you're having a serious disagreement?
- Describe a time when a relationship was negatively impacted by your speech or actions towards another person.

Social-Awareness (Perspective Taking)

- Describe a time when you were able to help someone see another person's point of view.
- Describe a time your perspective added value to a situation.

Social-Awareness (Appreciating Diversity)

- Recall a time you've been grateful for the skills or knowledge someone else brought.
- Describe a time you actively worked to lift up someone who was being oppressed.

Self-Management

Self-Management (Impulse Control):

- Describe a time when you were able to wait for a strong emotion to pass before acting.
- What are some triggers (situations, words, self-talk) that make it hard for you to pause and think before you speak or act?

Self-Management (Self-Motivation)

- What factors make you willing, and even energized, to work hard on something?
- Describe a time you lacked motivation to do something you had planned to do.

Self-Management (Stress Management)

- Describe some physical cues that help you notice you're experiencing stress.
- Describe some techniques you have for calming yourself in stressful situations.
- Describe a time when stress was a positive motivating factor for you.

Self-Management (Self-Discipline)

- Describe a task you find challenging to get started on.
- Describe a time you didn't feel like sticking with a task or goal but you kept going.

Self-Management (Goal Setting & Organizational Skills)

- What is a big goal that you've set for yourself?
- Describe a goal someone else set for you that you value and feel is achievable.
- What some areas that you do not feel organized?
- What are some areas that you feel organized?

Relationship Skills

Relationship Skills (Teamwork)

- Describe the characteristics of a team you've been a part of that worked well together.
- Describe a time when you were able to apply your talents to a project.

Relationship Skills (Social Engagement)

- What challenges or barriers prevent you from working more effectively with others?
- What supports (people, strategies, resources, etc.) would help you engage more effectively with others?

Relationship Skills (Communication)

- How do you know whether you have effectively conveyed your message to others?
- Describe a time when clear and effective communication made a positive difference.

Relationship Skills (Intra-Racial Healing)

- What are some valuable contributions that you've seen others make to improve your racial identity group?
- How do you feel about the way professional athletes stand up for racial justice?

Relationship Skills (Relationship Building)

- What role do relationships play in achieving your goals?
- Describe a time when you were able to work successfully with someone you found difficult.

Responsible Decision-Making

Responsible Decision-Making (Ethical Responsibility)

- Describe a time when you felt you had a moral or ethical responsibility to make a certain decision or take a specific action.
- Give an example of decision you made that impacted others.

Responsible Decision-Making (Analyzing Situations)

- What are some skills that a person needs to figure out what's going on in a situation?
- Describe something you're working on and what are potential risks involved in the journey.

Responsible Decision-Making (Evaluating & Reflecting)

- How do you decide whether something went well or didn't go well?
- Describe a time when looking back on something with others was beneficial.

Responsible Decision-Making (Solving Problems)

- Describe a time you used the information from your intuition or gut instinct to help you solve a problem.
- Describe a problem you have seen someone resolve effectively.

Responsible Decision-Making (Identifying Problems)

- Describe a time when your initial solution to a problem didn't get to the root cause of the problem.
- Describe a time when you were successful in anticipating a potential problem or roadblock.