

Community Circles

Leveraging community educators in learning

Discover the ways schools are leveraging community educators to deepen learning for students. Community educators include youth-serving professionals and volunteers who leverage their knowledge and skills to support learners and complement professional educators. Below, Jefferson Elementary School's classified staff assume community educator roles during their monthly family time.



Reoccurring sessions



Multiple community educators



Social-emotional learning



Community building

What it is, and why we love it

When a child enrolls at Jefferson Elementary, they are assigned to a community circle composed of at least one child from each grade level. Having so many groups requires a lot of adult facilitators. Jefferson gathers all of the talented and supportive adults in its community by inviting every staff member at the school to participate as a facilitator, extending engagement beyond just teachers and administrators, to include classified staff as well. These individuals lead community circles – what Jefferson coined "family time" – which support the social-emotional needs of the same, small group of K-6 learners over an academic year. In Jefferson's case, this same group of learners stays together throughout their entire elementary experience, welcoming new members as older ones move on.

Community circles are held monthly with the entire school population simultaneously, scattered across the campus. Community circles give young people a stronger sense of belonging in the school environment by connecting them to other children outside of their classroom, providing space for them to make connections with other caring adults and offering sheltered time for social-emotional development. The social-emotional lessons are designed by the school counselor, ensuring that the circles are responsive to community-wide needs. Facilitators have the flexibility to use these lessons or adapt them to their group's needs as they see fit.

Research indicates that if we allow classified staff members – who typically have little say over their job duties and responsibilities – to craft aspects of these roles, they can face increased enjoyment, meaning and satisfaction in their positions (Berg et al., 2007). The classified staff at Jefferson report that they feel important and involved and have developed a different kind of bond with the students. One front office staff member says they have gained confidence through working alongside the teacher with whom they facilitate, and would now feel comfortable leading their small group alone. A former classroom aide, who has since relocated to the front office, says she loves the opportunity to get back into the classroom and is now thinking about obtaining a teaching license.

Jefferson's administrative team, led by Principal Genessee Avila Montes, has put a lot of planning into executing smooth, monthly, family-time sessions and the results show. Fifth- and sixth-grade students take ownership and responsibility in looking out for younger kids. New students step easily into community and belonging. The staff turnover rate is extremely low, and the school has achieved an A+ rating as a school of academic excellence.



Strong relationships with school staff — in addition to teachers — has dramatic effects on student motivation, academic engagement, social skill development and the exhibition of positive behaviors."

— Education Trust & MDRC, 2021

What's made this program a success

Program logistics

- This program was initiated by a second-grade teacher who read a blog and reached out to the administration to create a similar program on their campus.
- Families are comprised of two adults – one teacher and one staff member – and five to 10 students from each grade level.
- Jefferson holds family time monthly, but scheduling can be modified to fit individual campus needs: biweekly, monthly or bi-monthly, for example.
- Fifth and sixth graders collect younger students and escort them to their family's meeting area.
- In the beginning, students wear name tags with meeting room numbers to help them navigate.

Social-emotional growth

- Students are provided with a consistent group to explore using their voice and choice.
- A nurturing space is cultivated in which students can bring up and learn about common social issues across varying grade levels, with tools to strengthen emotional growth and well-being, opening the possibility of organic, near-peer mentorship.

Prepared teachers and staff

- Obtaining staff-wide, buy-in can be a challenge – apprehension to big changes on campus is relevant – yet moving forward without staff support and engagement will likely put a halt to the program down the road. Jefferson found success through transparency, by clearly explaining the why and by providing space for the entire staff to voice their ideas and concerns.
- Jefferson admin distributed the expertise of family time leaders by pairing classified staff with professional educators to provide students with both pedagogical support and multiple caring adults, from different backgrounds.

Lasting connections

- Students gain deeper and personalized learning in an additional setting, outside of academics.
- Increased sense of community and belonging across grade-levels for students and staff.
- The mixed-grade level, family-time circle provides opportunities for future networking with near-peers and builds social-capital.

Impact on learning for students	Impact on staff	Considerations for implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students see value in community and belonging.• Students are able to connect with additional caring adults besides their classroom teacher.• Increases in campus-wide, academic achievement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater job satisfaction built through meaningful relationships with students and other staff members.• Classified staff begin to seek substitute and professional educator certifications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The logistics takes time. Encourage patience and flexibility with staff and students.• Start small, perhaps at a slower cadence or a smaller pilot group within the school.

References

Berg, J.M., Dutton, J.E., Wrzesniewski, A. (2007). What is job crafting and why does it matter? Positive Organizational Scholarship. <https://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/What-is-Job-Crafting-and-Why-Does-it-Matter1.pdf>

Trust, Ed; MDRC. (2021, July 21). The importance of strong relationships - a strategy to solve unfinished learning. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/resource/the-importance-of-strong-relationships/>