

# Deeper than Icebreakers: Activities to Know Your Students

## PURPOSE

These three activities are designed for educators who are doing the active work to more deeply understand the identities, cultures, and experiences of their students, from a place of openness, respect, and empathy. These learning opportunities for educators are the starting point from which trust, relationship, and culturally affirming and sustaining practices can be built.

## DIRECTIONS:

1. Review the three activities (including their guidance and recommendations about timing, capacity, etc.), and choose which one(s) are the best fit.
2. Use the activity description and best practices to plan your activity.
3. Leverage the tools that follow each activity to support your implementation (e.g., *debrief agenda*, *sample prompts*).

In this tool, you will find three strategies with shared purpose:

### 1. Community Walk

- The highest-lift practice, but also potentially the most impactful practice
- Best when done in the summer or near the start of the school year, and used as the foundation for relationships with caregivers, families and the school community, as well as to inform practice
- This activity is most successful when it is done as a whole school, with leaders, teachers and staff all participating and in partnership with community members.

### 2. Shadow-a-Student Day

- A medium-lift practice
- Best when done within the school year (e.g., *not in the first few weeks*), when you will get an accurate picture of a typical day for a student
- The activity is most successful when teams or entire staff can work together to coordinate and make this happen logistically (e.g., *school leaders get substitutes, teachers cover one another's classes, etc.*).

### 3. Student Spotlight

- The lowest-lift practice
- Can be done at the start of and throughout the year (*see full description for sequencing considerations*)
- The activity can happen successfully in many different ways because of its flexibility – within one classroom, in an advisory, across an entire grade or school, etc.

## Co-created norms create physical, emotional and identity safety

Before using these strategies in your classroom or school community, review or establish norms for how all community members agree to act and interact. These should be developed together, based on shared values, which represent the diverse cultures and perspectives of the school community. For example, norms might sound like:

*"We treat our school community as we would our own home." "We speak one at a time to hear everyone's voice."*

*"We hold ourselves accountable to the impact of our actions, not just our intent."*

*"We are ALL responsible to make each other feel welcome here."*

## Community Walk

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The goal of a community walk is to build an assets-based understanding of the history, people and culture in your school community. This learning experience can and should build connection and trust with students and the parents, caregivers and community members, as school staff visit the community spaces they call home. Importantly, this work should also inform future collaboration, teaching and support for students.

### Activity Description:



Co-planned with community *members*, the community walk takes school staff on an assets-based tour through the neighborhood(s).

Before the walk, learn about the history and current context of the community, and discuss or review norms for maintaining respect.

During the walk, you might visit places where students play, eat, buy groceries, go to worship, spend time with friends and family, etc. You might also meet and talk with families, community leaders, school alumni, etc. The walk should always prioritize what is most important to your specific community.

After the walk, debrief and reflect as a school staff, and determine how you will carry your learnings into your future community collaboration, teaching and support for students.

### Best Practices:

- ✓ **Set a clear, assets-based purpose**  
Ensure that all participants share the WHY, to avoid focusing on deficits or taking a “savior” stance.
- ✓ **Invite students and community members to co-plan and lead**  
Invite students, parents and caregivers, grandparents, school alumni, religious leaders, community organizers, business leaders, etc. to both shape the itinerary for the walk and serve as guides and liaisons during the walk itself.
- ✓ **Commit to the experience together, as a whole staff**  
The experience of a community walk is most successful when it is shared by all leaders, teachers, student support staff, etc. School leaders should take an active role in ensuring all staff have sufficient time and space to participate fully.
- ✓ **Learn about the community context with “teach-ins,” pre-reads, etc.**  
Before going out on the walk, invite a community member to share about the history and current context of the neighborhood with staff, with an assets orientation. They might share who is in the community, how it has changed over time, what it values and celebrates, important places, events, people, organizations, etc. If that’s not possible, a dedicated staff member should put together pre-reads or a presentation to share the same information.
- ✓ **Be a guest, not a tourist**  
Remember, you are there to build trust and connect! Treat your walk through the school community with the same care and respect as you would as a guest in someone’s home. In that spirit, try going out in small groups, during the day, with a structured itinerary, led by your community member.
- ✓ **Use this as a launching point**  
A community walk at the beginning of the year should serve as a starting place from which to build trusting relationships, open up conversations, provide supports for students, and create relevant student learning experiences.

## Community Walk (Debrief)

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The debrief should include *all* staff members who participated, and can be done immediately following the walk (e.g., as a communal breakfast or lunch) and include community members (students, families, etc.), as is feasible.

### Launch:

- Explain that the purpose of the debrief is to reflect and learn from the community walk experience, and to plan for how we can all take action to use those learnings throughout the year.
- Review group norms.

### Engage:

#### Part 1: Individual Reflection

Invite staff to independently reflect/write about the following prompts. You may want to chart or share these questions in a handout:

- A. What is important to your school community?**  
What were artifacts you saw or conversations you had that showed what the community values? What are students and community members proud of?
- B. What assets did you find in your school community?**  
How does the community care for each other? What beauty did you see? What made you excited?
- C. How did you connect with your school community during the walk?**  
What similarities to your own neighborhood and experiences did you see? Whom did you talk with, or build relationships with, during the walk? What made you feel a sense of belonging in your school community?
- D. How has your understanding of your students deepened through this experience?**  
How has your thinking changed? What is something you would like to know more about or better understand?

#### Part 2: Group Discussion

Next, invite staff members to share in whole or small groups some big takeaways from their individual reflections.

### Plan for Action:

Ask the group to brainstorm together the actions they might take both individually and as a school, based on the community walk. This can include how to better partner with families, caregivers and community members, how to leverage community assets to support students, how to make learning experiences relevant for students, etc.

Some examples might sound like:

- *"I'm going to continue this conversation with my students by sharing with them all the wonderful things I experienced today, and asking them to share what they love about their community and what else they would want me to know about it."*
- *"I'd like to get a group together to make a list of all the community resources we saw today, so that we can use that in the future to share with staff and families."*
- *"I met several people in the community who I think would be great additions to our extended PTA – I'm going to reach out and invite them formally."*
- *"When we teach our science unit, I'm going to include the initiative I heard about to increase green coverage in our neighborhood and reach out to the local nursery and farms to see if we can bring experts in to talk about ecology in the area."*

### Wrap-Up:

Invite participants to share their most important takeaway and expressions of gratitude (especially if community members are present). Lastly, set a time to revisit these reflections and action steps in upcoming all-staff, team or department meetings.

## Shadow-a-Student Day

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The goal of shadowing a student is to spend the entire day as a student would, experiencing and deeply empathizing with their perspective. This learning opportunity can be the catalyst for building understanding and connection and for meaningful practice change.

### Activity Description:



Follow one student for an entire day, like a “shadow” (while at school, or to and from home).

You can either take an observer-only stance (not participating, like a fly on the wall) or engage fully as a student would (participating in everything students do – e.g., sitting on the rug, lessons, lunchtime).

At the end of the day, debrief what you experienced and learned with other educators and/or the student you have shadowed.

### Best Practices:

✓ **Commit to the entire day**

As challenging as it may be to schedule, the purpose of this activity is to truly experience a full day through the eyes of a student, and spending only a few hours or going back to your regular adult schedule for some periods means you will miss out on that!

✓ **Take off your “teacher hat”**

While shadowing your student, do your best to reorient yourself away from what you might normally pay attention to (e.g., *redirecting a student who is distracted*), to attune to your student’s individual experience.

✓ **Witness different student experiences**

If multiple educators are shadowing students, try to select students who likely have diverse perspectives and experiences at school (e.g., *students with different racial and gender identities, first languages, academic skills, disabilities, resources outside of school*).

✓ **Use this opportunity to learn, not teach**

When debriefing with students, let them speak first and to their own experiences. Ask questions and affirm what they share. Resist the urge to offer feedback or advice in this moment – this is about *your* learning, not theirs.

When debriefing with other educators, focus on sharing what you heard, saw and felt – stories, “aha” moments, wonderings and reflections. (*See next pages for additional guidance*)

## Shadow-a-Student Day (Sample Scripts)

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### Elementary Students:

In an elementary setting where students stay together with their class for most of the day, it may not be necessary to ask for student volunteers for shadowing. Instead, select one classroom to observe (in partnership with your colleagues), and focus on one student. Be sure to explain to *all* of the students what you are doing and why.

See the following script as an example:

*"Today, I'm not going to be a teacher – I'm going to be a student in your class! I'm going to do everything that you do today – I'll be a part of every lesson, eat lunch with you, go to music – everything. You can help me by showing me how things work here in your class.*

*I am doing this because I want to know what it's really like to be a student, so that I can be the best teacher I can be and make our school even better for all of you. Thanks for letting me be a guest here today! Any questions?"*

### Secondary Students:

In a secondary setting where students switch between classes, you might either ask for student volunteers to shadow or allow students to opt out, and then let a student know afterwards that you were shadowing them. Either way, be sure to share with *all* students what you are doing and why.

See the following script as an example:

*"Next week, some teachers at our school are going to do "shadow a student day," because we want to better understand what it's really like to be a student here, so that we can make our school better for everyone. We want to live up to our core values of Curiosity and Respect as teachers!*

*If you would like to volunteer to have a teacher be your "shadow," you would be helping them to learn by letting them attend your full schedule – classes, passing time, lunch, etc. – and then talking with them afterwards about your thoughts on the day. The teacher will make sure to give you a respectful amount of space. This is not to give you a grade – it is to learn from you. What questions do you have?"*

## Shadow-a-Student Day (Debrief)

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The debrief should include all staff members who participated and students who were shadowed (if secondary), and would ideally take place at the end of the shadowing day or the following morning.

### Launch:

- Explain that the purpose of the debrief is to reflect and learn from the shadow-a-student experience, and to plan for how we can all take action to use those learnings throughout the year.
- Review group norms.

### Engage:

#### Part 1: Students Share

If students are present (particularly in a secondary setting), first invite them to share anything they would like to about their day and what they would want their “shadow” to know, ask, or think more about.

Ask questions and affirm what they share. Resist the urge to offer feedback or advice in this moment – this is about your learning, not theirs.

#### Part 2: Educators Share

Invite staff who shadowed a student to share:

- A. **What did you hear, see, and feel while stepping into your student’s shoes for a day?** Share stories, “aha” moments, wonderings and reflections.

If more than one student was shadowed:

- B. **What did you notice was the same or different across students’ experiences? Why do you think that is?**

### Plan for Action:

Once everyone has shared their experience shadowing a student, discuss:

- C. **What might you change in your own practice, based on your student’s experience today?**

Some examples might sound like:

- *“I’m going to start every period with just one minute of mindfulness – I needed a reset moment with such a long, hectic day, and it was go-go-go. It’s a small thing I know I can do.”*
- *“I’m going to start giving homework weekly instead of daily. I see how much students are getting from each class, and I want to build their self-management skills AND give them the opportunity to prioritize and do what works for them. Today alone, they got so much assigned to them, I think they need some breathing room.”*
- *“I’d like to figure out a way to have 1:1 touchpoints with my students each quarter, to ask them how things are going, what they need from me, etc. I saw today how different each kid’s experience is, and I don’t think I’m fully in touch with that yet. Does anyone know of a best practice or resource I could use for that?”*

### Wrap-Up:

Invite participants to share their most important takeaways and expressions of gratitude (especially if students are present).

Last, set a time to revisit these reflections and action steps in upcoming all-staff, team or department meetings.

## Student Spotlight

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The goal of the student spotlight is to give educators and students the opportunity to share and learn about one another's identities, cultures and experiences, in order to build trust, understanding and a sense of belonging. Educators can also leverage these understandings to make learning experiences for students more culturally affirming and sustaining.

### Activity Description:



In the student spotlight, students are all invited to share something personal about their identities, cultures and/or experiences with the group.

Sharing prompts can range from a low-stakes question about students' likes and dislikes – “What's your favorite snack?” – to a more personal question about their lives – “Bring in a picture of someone who is important to you” – as the group builds trust and practices the social skills needed to participate fully and respectfully.

This activity can be facilitated more often, in small doses (e.g., students each share something small as part of the daily morning meeting), or as a longer, ongoing project (e.g., one student per week brings in an artifact to share during Advisory).

### Best Practices:

✓ **Invite all students to participate ...**

All students (and adults) should have equal opportunities to share. Some ways to give ownership to students over this activity are to have students propose topics and prompts, co-create norms for the sharer and the audience, or even volunteer to be facilitators of the activity (if developmentally appropriate).

✓ **... But allow for choice and opting out**

To maintain physical, emotional and identity safety, it is critical that students be able to choose what and how much they share, “pass” with the option to share later, or opt out. This should be a clear part of the norms for this activity.

✓ **Start with low-stakes sharing, progressing as the group builds trust**

When planning sharing prompts, start with low-stakes, low-vulnerability topics that carry minimal social “risk” for students. This allows the group a chance to practice norms and start to build relationships in a relatively comfortable setting. However, staying at this surface-level conversation, even as the group progresses, misses an important opportunity to go deeper and learn more meaningfully about one another. (See following page for more guidance)

✓ **Scaffold social skill development**

Natural opportunities to practice social skills like taking conversational turns, asking respectful follow-up questions, and appreciating differences instead of “othering” will inevitably happen during this activity. Instead of leaving students to navigate these skills on their own, consider providing supports like modeling, sentence starters, group debriefs, 1:1 private feedback, etc.

If students struggle with these skills (and therefore group trust is deteriorating), you might go back to lower-stakes sharing, try working in small groups or pairs, and provide more directive supports.

✓ **Try it out with staff first**

Doing spotlight activities as a whole staff, grade team, or department will both give adults the opportunity to learn about one another *and* provide a helpful model for setting up students to do the same.

## Student Spotlight (Sample Prompts)

**Less personal,  
Lower stakes,  
Good for getting  
started**

- Name your top 3 snacks.
- What is your favorite part of the school day?
- If you were stranded on an island, what is one thing you would want to have with you?
- Recommend a book, TV show, or movie that you like.
- If you could have one superpower, what would it be?

- If you were the teacher for the day, what is one rule that you would make? *Why?*
- What do you think is the most important quality in a friend?
- Draw what is “on your mind” today. (Draw a big circle to represent your mind, and then add what you’re thinking about.)
- What song would be on your soundtrack for today?
- Talk about a good memory from this school year.

**More personal,  
Higher vulnerability  
and trust required**

- Tell about an important tradition in your family.
- Show a photo of someone who is important to you.
- What is something you have done that you are really proud of?
- Draw a map of your family – given and/or chosen. You can create it any way that feels right to you.
- Bring in an artifact that represents something you love.

### Remember to consider how a prompt sets students up to feel a sense of safety and belonging. Ask:

- *Does the topic have embedded assumptions about culture, particularly what is considered “normal” or “strange” by a dominant culture? Does the topic have embedded assumptions related to privilege?*
- *Is the topic inclusive of diverse experiences?*
- *Is it likely that the topic could bring up experiences that are stressful for students or are not appropriate for whole-group sharing?*