Creating Caring Students Using Classroom Communication Routines

Ken Peterson, Susan Halverson and Wendy Wise

We create caring schools by developing caring students—those who will care for themselves and others, as well as about society and learning. Our emphasis on caring includes nurturing in our students civility, citizenship, the ability to make sound moral judgments, and a respect for others.

We achieve these ambitious goals by using classroom routines that directly and intentionally teach enhanced communication skills. There is a link between communication and caring. The challenge is to put good communication into practice in the classroom.

Defining “Good”

Good communication means listening well, being open about feelings that affect learning, and being able to engage in an exchange of information—both data and feelings—with others. We find that our intentional routines teach communication skills, ease minor conflicts, lessen behavioral interruptions, and increase student learning.

In teaching classroom communication, we use specific routines that deal with everyday classroom interactions. For example, we use Appreciations and Concerns (see box) to deal with the times students recognize cooperation and caring from each other, as well as the times they (and teachers) are careless or block and thwart the work that needs to be done.

Appreciations and Concerns
Use this activity as a 3½-minute opening, transition, or closure activity, once or twice a week:

- Direct attention around the room to each student. Monitor the quality and focus of students' statements, and coach students with suggestions to shape their statements.
- Tell students who have an appreciation or concern for someone in the room (student or teacher) to say it briefly directly to that person.
- Ask recipients of the appreciation or concern to give a neutral acknowledgment (“I hear you” or “Thank you”) with no explanations, expressions of gratitude, or reciprocations.

The “Stuff” of Caring

Our classroom communication activities are not stand-alone assignments done for the sake of honing a good communication skill or idea. They are not simulations; we don't role-play a conflict. Rather, we use tasks that students must perform in the everyday life of the school. A student serving as door captain, for example, greets school messengers or visitors. This gives the student practice in communicating with—and meeting the needs of—people outside the classroom. It also frees the teacher from interruption. This is an example of an authentic task that contributes to the life and work of the classroom.

We find that 8–12 of these routines (see box) must be repeated over several months to have an effect in the classroom. Caring is complex and needs to be nurtured. The repeated routines allow students to live out and experience human interaction that is authentic, open, honest, goal-directed, individualized, patient, and effective. This is the stuff that caring comes from.

Direct Communication Techniques

- Curriculum Negotiation
- Classroom Rights
- Captains
- Partners
- Class Meetings
- The Truth
- Think, Pair, Share; Plus, Minus, Interesting
- Reciprocal Peer Teaching
Editor’s Note: The authors are interested in forming networks to support teachers who want to develop additional and more effective classroom routines. The authors write, “We know that instilling good classroom communication takes anywhere from one to two months at the beginning of the year before we see the increase in caring. Teachers need support from peers in order to keep it up.” Contact Kenneth D. Peterson for information.

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