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# RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM NEWSLETTER

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## Morning Meeting

### A Powerful Way to Begin the Day

**Excerpts from our new Release:**

***The Morning Meeting Book***

**By Roxann Kriete**

In the spring of my first year as a secondary school teacher, I got a letter from a student for whom I had a particular fondness, letting me know that she was dropping out of school. School wasn't making much sense to her and little that she was being asked to learn held much interest for her.

She wrote, almost apologetically, that school just wasn't a place she felt she belonged. More than twenty years later, her words still seem profoundly sad to me:

I will always remember how you said "Hi, Sue" as I walked into eighth period. It made me feel like it really mattered that I came.

It touched and pained me that something which seemed so small to me, an act I hadn't even been aware of, had meant so much to her. I vowed to learn something from it and became more intentional about greeting my students.

I stationed myself by the door and tried to say a little something to each one as they entered, or at least to make eye contact and smile at every student, not just the ones like Sue for whom I had an instinctive affinity.

Gradually I realized how much I was learning at my post by the door. I observed who bounced in with head up and smile wide, whose eyes were red-rimmed from tears shed in the girls' room at lunch, who mumbled a response into his collar and averted his eyes every day for an entire semester. I didn't know what to do about much of it, but at least I was learning how to notice.

I have learned a lot since then. It is good for students to be noticed, to be seen by their teacher. But it is only a start, not enough by itself. They must notice and be noticed by each other as well.

Years after I taught Sue, I joined the staff of Greenfield Center School, Northeast Foundation for Children's K-8 lab school. There, I saw teachers teaching students to greet each other, to speak to each other, to listen to each other. I saw students start each day together in Morning Meeting where noticing and being noticed were explicit goals.

Today, many children in kindergartens, elementary and middle schools around the country launch their school days in Morning Meetings. All classroom members—grown-ups and students—gather in a circle, greet each other, listen and respond to each others' news, practice academic and social skills, and look forward to the events in the day ahead. Morning Meeting is a particular and deliberate way to begin the day, a way which builds a community of caring and motivated learners.

### **The Format**

Morning Meeting is made up of four, sequential components and lasts up to a total of a half hour each day. The components provide daily opportunities for children to practice the skills of greeting, listening and responding, speaking to a group, reading, group problem-solving, and noticing and anticipating. The four components are:

- Greeting—children greet each other by name, often including handshaking, clapping, singing and other activities.
- Sharing—students share some news of interest to the class and respond to each other, articulating their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a positive manner.
- Group Activity—the whole class does a short activity together, building class cohesion through active participation.
- News and Announcements—students develop language skills and learn about the events in the day ahead by reading and discussing a daily message posted for them.

Teachers and students crave a certain amount of predictability and routine in the school day, especially at the start. The format of Morning Meeting is predictable, but there is plenty of room for variation and change. Meetings reflect the style and flavor of individual teachers and groups. They also reflect the ebb and flow of a school year's seasons—September's new shoes and anxious, careful faces; December's pre-holiday excitement; February's endless runny noses; April's spring-has-sprung exuberance. Its mixture of routine and surprise, of comfort and challenge, make Morning Meeting a treasured and flexible teaching tool.

### **Morning Meeting Sets the Tone for Learning**

The way we begin each day in our classroom sets the tone for learning and speaks volumes about what and whom we value, about our expectations for the way we will treat each other, and about the way we believe learning occurs.

Children's learning begins the second they walk in the doors of the building. It matters to children whether they are greeted warmly or overlooked, whether the classroom feels chaotic and unpredictable, or ordered and comforting. If they announce, "My cat got hit by a car last night but it's gonna' be all right," they may find an interested, supportive audience or one that turns away. Every detail of their experience informs students about their classroom and their place in it.

When we start the day with everyone together, face-to-face, welcoming each person, sharing news, listening to individual voices, and communicating as a caring group, we make several powerful statements. We say that every person matters. We say that the way we interact individually and as a group matters. We say that our culture is one of friendliness and thoughtfulness. We say that hard work can be accomplished and important discoveries can be made by playing together. We say that teachers hold authority, even though they are a part of the circle. We say that this is a place where courtesy and warmth and safety reign.

In order to learn, we must take risks—offering up a tentative answer we are far from sure is right or trying out a new part in the choir when we are not sure we can hit the notes. We can take these risks only when we know we will be respected and valued, no matter the outcome. We must trust in order to risk, and Morning Meeting helps create a climate of trust.

### **Morning Meeting Merges Social and Academic Learning**

Morning Meeting provides an arena where distinctions that define social, emotional and academic skills fade, and learning becomes an integrated experience.

Teachers have long known and researchers are now confirming that social skills are not just something to be taught so that children behave well enough to get on with the real business of schooling. Rather, they are inextricably intertwined with cognitive growth and intellectual progress. A person who can listen well, who can frame a good question and has the assertiveness to pose it, who can examine a situation from a number of perspectives will be a strong learner.

All those skills—skills essential to academic achievement—must be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined in the context of social interaction. Morning Meeting is a forum in which all that happens. It is not an add-on, something extra to make time for, but rather an integral part of the day's planning and curriculum.

### **A microcosm of the way we wish our schools to be**

The time one commits to Morning Meeting is an investment which is repaid many times over. The sense of group belonging and the skills of attention, listening, expression, and cooperative interaction developed in Morning Meeting are a foundation for every lesson, every transition time, every lining-up, every upset and conflict, all day and all year long. Morning Meeting is a microcosm of the way we

wish our schools to be—communities full of learning, safe and respectful and challenging for all.

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