

Rituals and Traditions

“In order to make up our minds we must know how we feel about things; and to know how we feel about things we need the public images of sentiment that only ritual, myth and art can provide.”- Clifford Geertz

Community is a vital connector- to other people, to our past, present, and future, to the environment, to social and political issues, etc. Unfortunately, modern societies are fragmented. Technology, urbanization, and weakened family structures eat away at our sense of relatedness. There are fewer bonds holding us together. Many people are isolated without the family, friends, institutions, or rituals that are the essence of a sense of place, of belonging. Community is becoming more of an intangible concept and less of a practical reality. Safe places are increasingly rare.

At the most basic of levels, if students are to get anything of value out of school, it **must be** a safe place. They need to be able to get along with the other people who share the school environment. And as educators, our ideal is to use this sense of safety to create avenues for responsible contribution from our students—allowing them the opportunity to practice and define themselves as individuals yet connected members of our society.

One effective way to accomplish these things is through modifications to the culture of the classroom. *A classroom culture is defined by the rituals, traditions, civic values, attitudes, language and patterns of interaction that nurture feelings of connection, personal potential, contribution, and accountability.* It is sometimes easy to accept a classroom culture as a given—determined by the makeup of our student groups and by the nature of the school environment. Admittedly, these exert a strong influence, yet teachers actually have a great deal of control over the classroom environment, particularly in the way they choose to build and maintain the connections to and between students.

“I have a Mystery Kid every week in each of my classes. At the beginning of the year I ask kids to make a list of statements about themselves that are somewhat unique (ex. places visited on vacation, special talents, likes or dislikes, unusual hobbies, pets, etc.) at least 8-10. Then, on Monday I put up one clue. Classmates write their guesses down and drop them into a box. Every day that week a new clue goes up. On Friday, I identify the Mystery Kid and his/her name goes up on the front window. The first person to guess his/her identity and the MK wins a tootsie pop. The Mystery Kid also gets a Science Sawbuck redeemable for a number of privileges. The next week, that child takes attendance, hands out and collects papers, runs messages and errands, etc. The kids enjoy it and it occupies their attention in the time before the bell rings. We also learn some interesting facts about each other!”
-Sue Sciuto, Teacher

Some rituals, and traditions are developed together and respected and/or carried forward over time, others are carried from year to year by the teacher, becoming rites of passage that students anticipate years in advance. Some are accidental, “in jokes,” that can bind the group together. (It goes without saying that any ritual can become powerfully destructive if even a single student is left on the “out” side of the joke.)

It might be tempting to think of rituals and traditions as high-prep, complicated events, but simple process like ways of beginning and ending class, routines for managing classroom materials, or signals for moving from one activity to the next can be just as meaningful.

No matter how they arise, all rituals/traditions must have a clear link to the group’s shared values, they must reinforce the contract in a concrete (physical/visual/auditory) way so that students can make clearly make the connection between what we believe and what we do. (N. Rath, personal communication, August 7, 2025)

“At the beginning of the term we collect water from Bristol, spring which is where the water bubbles up not too far from here. On the last day of the semester we we end up at Plum Island, which is where the water ends up from here, emptying into the ocean. So we release the water there to signify the end of our journey together.”
-Rivers and Revolutions Class, Concord Carlisle High School, Concord, MA

Or, in the words of Nelia Rath, Assistant Head of School at The Riverside School in Lyndonville, Vermont, “As part of creating a classroom culture, we establish some agreements about the ideas and values that matter to us, but then we need things to do that reinforce those concepts. What we do tells us what we care about, and what we care about defines what we do.

If Riverside cares about “supportive community,” then we must start each day with “good morning” in our assembly and we must keep our fall field trip tradition alive to establish and strengthen relationships between all teachers-students-parents. If we see the 8th graders take leadership roles in that assembly and on that field trip then you know that it’s true we are about “patient leadership” and the 8th graders are getting to feel and experience what that might mean. When we question whether our quite ritualized graduation ceremony is too long, or shouldn't include kindergarteners, or have a limit on the number of awards given we ask ourselves, is it in line with our mission/values?

Rituals teach us about ourselves. They provide a space of common cultural understanding.”

“I found this old handmade chalkboard at the dump. Brought it home, cleaned it up and set it up in the hallway in a corner at the top of the stairs. Each day I put a different joke up there so it was the first thing students saw each day. Lots of eye rolls, but if I didn't get a chance to change it or if I was out, kids noticed. They looked forward to it. Best dump find ever. “
-Carisa Corrow, *Educating for Good*

I used to have students write a letter to themselves in ten years and the principal let me tuck them behind their diplomas. Every once in a while someone will reach out. Here's one I received in June.

"Hi, Mrs. Corrow. Just wanted to let you know that I opened and read that letter to my future self that you had us write. I was supposed to read it on the 3rd, but waited until this past Saturday. I did so with my friend Aaron, who was also in your class. It was fun to do with him, but kinda not. My letter was mostly a dry inventory of my life, rather than how I was feeling, what my dreams were, things like that. I really wish I had given my future self a better insight as to how I was feeling at the time.

I'm very glad you had us write that letter, and I'm planning to write a letter to myself in 2035, if I actually get around to it."

-Carisa Corrow, Educating for Good

Sample Rituals & Traditions

- **Class/community meetings** held perhaps daily in self-contained settings and routinely in other environments. These can have rituals within them, like specific ways to begin or end them, or ground rules for content or procedure.
- **Huddling after presentations:** after each small group presents its work, each of the other groups can be asked to huddle to consider the one thing that they liked best about the work presented, the one improvement they might suggest, etc. This feedback is given directly to the presenting group.
- **Base or home groups:** groups established for a given period of time that are responsible for attendance for their group, for communicating homework assignments to absent group members, etc.
- **Thumbs:** used as a means of checking understanding, taking a reading on a group's opinion, or looking for consensus. Thumbs up: complete agreement; thumbs wavering: not certain; thumbs down: definitely not.
- **Lineups:** when it is time to move out of the classroom to a different location, there could be an expectation that students will have to solve a quick lineup problem before they can leave. Examples: line up in alphabetical order by first names without talking; line up by hair color, by shoe size, or by birthday.
- **Recording:** whenever the class has a discussion or brainstorming session, one student takes responsibility for recording the ideas on a large sheet of paper to help build the group's memory.
- **Greeting** students and guests at the classroom door with specific language, songs, or hand gestures.
- **Daily Dedications:** When students share stories about those who have inspired and impacted them, the whole classroom feels more connected. [Learn more](#)
- **Meals** with faculty, staff, students, and caregivers
- **An annual event** prior to or during the school year to include parents in the classroom community
- **Team names/banners/logos/cheers/songs/t-shirts:** at the beginning of the year, the class chooses a team name, creates a banner or logo, etc., to help identify itself as a team or community
- **End-of-the-year exhibitions:** student-directed exhibitions of their own learning to the school or local community
- **Student-run parent conferences:** periodic meetings with parents in which students direct a portfolio-sharing
- **Student-planned trip:** an expedition to a location chosen by students with the planning done by students
- **Summer letter home:** a communication to families that focuses on the classroom community that will be built during the subsequent year—including names of class members, expressions of excitement and anticipation for the community sharing and growth, and so on
- **Student-chosen and planned unit:** an annual exploration of a student-selected and researched topic
- **Rite-of-passage** events, units, field trips, or experiences,
- **Graduation ceremonies:** student-planned programs that celebrate rites of passage, shared by the broader community
- **Party planning:** student-planned celebrations

A Procedure for Creating Rituals (and Traditions)

“Rituals—routines imbued with meaning—can often feel mysterious... but they’re more within our grasp than we think. When we understand the ingredients, we can concoct rituals that reliably influence the emotional state, mental focus, and sense of belonging of students (and staff).

Whether it's calming nerves before a test or uniting a group through shared values, a well-designed ritual can create lasting impact. Here's a step-by-step formula for crafting one with intention:

1. **Identify the need:** Start by asking, what emotional or social challenge are we addressing? Are students feeling anxious, distracted, or disconnected? This end goal will guide the form our ritual takes.
2. **Build the structure:** Effective rituals blend physical structure with symbolic meaning. First, define a clear sequence of actions, ideally formal, repetitive, and precise. Then, assign emotional or symbolic value. Link it to something bigger than ourselves... a shared belief, a cultural tradition, or a group identity.
3. **Choose the format:** Solo rituals (like silent breathing or affirmations) are great at helping students regulate their internal state. Group rituals (like lunchtime chants or graduation ceremonies) are good for fostering collective identity, community, and school spirit.
4. **Embrace causal opacity:** Importantly, rituals don't try to cause outcomes but rather just symbolically represent them. Their strength lies in being 'causally opaque' (focused on meaning, not mechanics). For example, a pre-test mantra doesn't directly affect results, but it can boost confidence and focus.
5. **Avoid Common Pitfalls:** Don't use rituals as disguised behaviour control—they work to foster connection, not compliance. And finally, use sparingly... no-one wants ritual fatigue.

Remember, rituals aren't just for students. We (staff) can benefit just as much from meaningful routines that promote confidence, focus, and connection. When crafted with care—and a bit of intention—rituals can bring rhythm, meaning, and belonging to the school day... for everyone. No magic required.”

(McCrea, 2025)

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