

5 MINUTE CHATS WITH THE PRINCIPAL

(Concept and content contributed by Gracie Branch, Associate Executive Director, Professional Learning, National Association of Elementary School Principals)

As educators explore viable options to integrate SEL and academic supports into transition plans while simultaneously creating a caring, safe, supportive environment for stakeholders, an informal chat may be an ideal approach. Easy to initiate whether face-to-face or virtual, chats serve as a friendly approach for educational leaders to begin the process of connecting, listening and healing with their school community.

The primary purpose of the chat is to hear about your conversation partner's experience and perspective so that you can know them as an individual, be responsive to their needs, learn from them for the benefit of the school, and build relational trust. If you feel the impulse to share your own story, pause and consider whether your sharing will advance this purpose or if it risks distracting from it.

This approach also models a way of showing care and empathy that other staff can imitate. After you have met with staff individually, share in an all-staff meeting what you learned and why the experience was valuable to you, and suggest they take a similar approach with the students and families they are caring for this year.

If possible, meet with all staff including your administrative team, teachers, support staff, security, transportation, custodial, and nutrition staff. Depending on the size of your school, it may be necessary to divide up responsibility among the larger administrative team so that all staff have a one-on-one conversation with someone they see as a school leader with the power to make decisions.

Initiate – If you already have a personalized relationship with the staff member, open the conversation as you would start any informal discussion with that person. If this is a relationship you are working to build, say/text/email something like:

“Do you have a few minutes to chat? I’m working on connecting with everyone on staff to get a better sense of what everyone is feeling and thinking about, and how I can be supportive.”

Open – Start with a question that invites your conversation partner to share as much or as little as they are comfortable sharing. Be more specific than “how are you?” –often we are socialized to answer that question with little thought or detail.

- What are your biggest priorities right now, not just in work but in life outside school?
- Who or what has been on your mind most recently?
- What would you like to see happen this school year?

Personalize – Let them know that knowing about them as a person is your first priority by bringing it up on the front end of your conversation.

- How are you taking care of yourself?
- What has changed for you since last school year?
- What’s your biggest source of stress right now?

Invite Feedback – Show your conversation partner that you value their perspective and are open to making changes based on their input.

- What do you and your colleagues need most right now?
- What do you think we’re getting right so far, that we can build on?
- What do you think we should be doing differently?

Close – End on an optimistic, forward-thinking note.

- What’s the best thing you’ve seen today?
- Is there a staff member or student who is inspiring you lately?
- What’s keeping you going/giving you energy/putting a smile on your face?

