# A GUIDE FOR HOLDING COMMUNITY-BUILDING CIRCLES DURING COVID-19 / DISTANCE-LEARNING

## Why (Virtual) Circles?

At Spokane Public Schools, we know how critical it is to build positive, trusting relationships with and among our students; these relationships encourage engagement, create the sense of safety that is necessary for learning, and help develop social and emotional skills.  COVID-19 is forcing us to find virtual ways to build our classroom communities.

The purpose of this guide is to provide you with tools and encouragement for holding Virtual Community-Building Circles with your students (and with your staff colleagues!).  Your virtual Circle Practice can then transition into the school building, when that time comes.

All of us have experienced dramatic disruption and change in our lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic.  Some of us have experienced silver-linings, like spending more time with family, but many are experiencing significant loss, fear, and trauma.  Circles can provide a space to share and reflect on both the challenges surrounding the pandemic as well as the lessons, gifts, and growths.

If you have any questions, ideas, or would like to dive deeper, please reach out to Julie Schaffer, Restorative Practices Manager at Spokane Public Schools.  Juliesc@spokaneschools.org. Additional resources are available on the District's Restorative Practices Webpage at spokaneschools.org/restorative.  Thank you for all you do, and we hope this Guide is helpful.

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## The Structure of a Circle

Circles are an ancient practice handed down from Indigenous People and are an essential part of Restorative Practices.  The structures used in a Circle help distinguish the Practice from other class interactions and create a safe space for equitable sharing.  Ways to create structure:

Consistently follow a **Circle Agenda**.

- Opening the Circle – A Quote, Song, Mindfulness Moment, Group Movement
- Clearly Explain the Purpose of the Circle
- Review Participation Agreements
- Prompts
- Closing the Circle – Quote, Song, Mindfulness, Movement

Use a **Talking Piece** to facilitate equitable, uninterrupted sharing.

> In an *in-person Circle*, the Circle Keeper offers a prompt, shares their response, and physically passes the talking piece to the next person in the circle, who then shares and passes it on.  Those who are not holding the talking piece are expected to listen.

> In a *virtual Circle,* it will still be important to create a structure where each person has equal and uninterrupted time to share.  The Circle Keeper could go in alphabetical order, by birthdate, or by some other method of choosing an order.  Also, each person could be invited to hold a special item from home while they are sharing in Circle.  Everyone else should mute their microphones when they are not sharing, and should show active listening through body language and eye contact.

Use **Participation Agreements** to create a safe space for sharing.

An ideal practice is for participants to create the Agreements together, in a Circle, to be used for all future Circles.  The Circle Keeper should review the Agreements before each Circle and confirm buy-in.  Showing the Agreements on the screen could be helpful.  These could include:
- Respect the Talking Piece
- Speak and listen from your heart
- Be Kind
- Participate

## The Role of The Circle Keeper (Facilitator)

It is an honor and a great responsibility to facilitate a Circle Process.  The Role of the Circle Keeper is to:

- ✓ Prepare the Circle Agenda (being mindful of time so that each person will have an equal opportunity to share)
- ✓ Set the Tone for the Circle (be vulnerable, encourage others)
- ✓ Model the Circle Agreements and ensure that participants follow them

Students should be encouraged to take on some or all of these roles.

The following traits will help you serve the Circle Process:

> *Good Listener – Patient – Confident – Vulnerable – Open-Minded/Non-Judgmental – Reflective – Flexible – Present – Calm – Organized – Encouraging – Approachable – Trusting – Respectful*

## Sample Virtual Circle

- **Welcome and Encouragement.** "Thank you for joining our Circle today. It is wonderful to see each of your faces. I feel so grateful that we can create this space to connect with one another. [*More encouraging words / appreciation for their showing up*]. While we cannot be physically sitting together in a Circle at this time, my hope is to create this same experience virtually, until we can be together in our classroom."

- **Purpose.** "Today's Circle is intended to help us learn more about each other so that we can create a strong learning community.**"**

- **Circle Agreements.** "A Circle Process is a different way of being together; it is an intentional way to communicate. When we are in Circle, we have a structure and Agreements to ensure that everyone feels safe and has an equal opportunity to share. Our Circle Agreements are to: respect the talking piece, speak and listen from our hearts, be kind, and participate [*explain each and check for understanding*]. Does everyone agree to follow our Agreements today? [*Students give Thumbs Up*]. Wonderful, thank you."

- **Opening. "**I would like to open our Circle by having everyone take a deep breath…now let it out slowly. Okay, lets do it one more time and this time, feel your body relaxing with the exhale [*model it*]. Beautiful, thank you. Now I would like to share a quote to set the tone for our Circle today: "Talk to yourself like you would to someone you love." Brene Brown. [*Tip - Opening and Closing the Circle is a great role for students to take on!*]

- **Check-in Prompt:** Share your name and one word to describe how you are feeling.

- **Prompt 1:** What makes you a good friend to others?

- **Prompt 2:** What is something that you could help teach others?

- **Closing Prompt:** Tell us about a person who is special to you, and how could you let them know what they mean to you?

- **Closing the Circle.** Thank you so much for showing up today and sharing so honestly and openly [*lots of encouragement here*]. I would like to close our circle with a quote from Maya Angelou and a collective clap. The quote is: 'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.'

  Okay, on three we are all going to clap…one, two, three, CLAP!

## Prompt Bank

<u>Icebreakers</u>

One word to describe how you are feeling

Favorites (music, food, hobby, color, movie, book, subject in school, etc)

I want more _____ in my life

<u>Building Relationships</u>

*Tip: Try to use "who are you" prompts that build self-esteem, as opposed to "what do you do or what do you have" prompts.*

Something you are good at

Someone you admire and why

Something you could teach others

Describe your perfect day

If you had a theme song, what would it be?

I feel [excited, energized, nervous, anxious, scared, sad] when _____

I am looking forward to _____

Describe your last act of kindness towards yourself or another person

What do you need to feel more [successful, safe, connected] at school?

What does respect look like and feel like to you?

What do you do to relax?

What makes you a good friend?

If you were a teacher or principal, what would you do to support students?

A challenge you overcame this week

<u>Closing Prompts</u>

I am grateful for _____

I will make someone else's day today by _____

I am proud of myself today for_____

One word to describe how you are feeling

COVID19 Prompts

Name one thing you miss about life pre-COVID-19

One word to describe your experience during COVID-19

How have you been most deeply impacted by COVID-19?

What is one thing you're disappointed you won't be able to attend or engage in?

Share a peak and a valley from this last week.

How are you staying connected to your friends and family right now?

What is one problem with virtual connection?

What is your favorite way to virtually engage?

What do you want your classmates to know about your experience during COVID-19?

How have you changed during COVID-19?

What gives you hope?

What questions do you have about COVID-19?

What makes you nervous or fearful?

What has surprised you about yourself during this time?

How have you helped someone else during this time?

Who has helped and supported you during COVID-19?

How can your school and teacher(s) do better to support you and your family?

What is one way you could help your classmates or family during distance-learning?

What is the most helpful thing you've heard or read that has supported you?  Advice, song, quote, book?

Creating Class Agreements

What kind of environment do you need to learn?  To feel safe?  To feel respected?

How do you want to be treated in this class?  What does that look like?  What does it look like when you are not being treated that way?

What should we do if our agreement is broken?

Engaging with Curriculum

How can we make this topic more relevant?

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What would help you grasp this topic more fully?  Who is willing to help?

When has this topic played a role in your life?

How could we take what we are learning and make a difference in our community?

How can we incorporate art, music, visual design into what we are learning?

What is most interesting, challenging, confusing, frustrating, exciting about this topic?

<u>Debriefing an Incident</u>

What happened?

What were you thinking/feeling when you saw or heard about what happened?

How are you feeling now about what happened?

Who was impacted?

What questions do you have?

What do you need to feel safe moving forward?  What do you need to be ready to learn?

## (Virtual) Circle Planning Worksheet

**What is the purpose of your circle?** (Building Relationships, Processing COVID-19, Checking In, Creating or Discussing Class Agreements, Debriefing an Incident, Curriculum/Content, Problem-Solving, Repairing Harm)

**How will you open the circle?** (Poem, Quote, Music, Mindfulness, Movement)

**Participant Agreements -** What guidelines will you use? How will you create/explain/introduce them? What questions will you ask to make sure everyone shares and agrees to these values?

**How will you introduce the purpose of the circle?**

**(Virtual) Talking Piece –** How will you ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to share and knows when to speak?

**Prompts -** What questions will you ask and in what order (low risk to high risk)? How do the questions relate to the purpose? What potential challenges may surface and how will you handle those?

**How will you close the circle?** (Reflection prompt, gratitude, appreciation for others, poem, quote, story, music, mindfulness)

**What Technology Issues do you Need to Address Before the Circle?**