

5 STEPS TO

Transform your School into a Community

along



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Introduction

Today's school leaders can feel like they are navigating through constant headwinds.

Amidst decreasing test scores and increasing mental well-being concerns, our school leaders are battling for all kids to succeed. Solving these challenges is high stakes—but there is a North Star to follow.

School leaders know that forming a school community built on strong teacher-student connections can positively influence student academic outcomes. When students feel seen and heard by their teachers, they show up to school differently—more primed to engage and learn. And when entire schools are centered around creating positive connections, cultures shift for lasting impact.

We're here to help school leaders chart a course towards these positive student outcomes. School leaders need a systematic and manageable way to foster the teacher-student connections necessary for students to feel trust in the classroom—every classroom, from homeroom to math to history. Because when students feel comfortable sharing their experiences with their teacher, their teacher has the insights that can help them craft individualized classroom instruction for more effective learning.

Read on to learn the 5 steps school leaders can follow—right now!—to create a dynamic school community that is primed for student success.



Understand the landscape

We've all read the headlines and experienced it firsthand: educators are experiencing unprecedented challenges when it comes to student learning loss, low student engagement and a rise in student behavior problems.

It's important to know there is support as you take the next steps to get to the root of these challenges. Here are some recent learnings:

According to the latest National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), known as "The Nation's Report Card":

In 2022, there was an average four-point drop in learning nationally compared with 2019. This translates into an average of 12 weeks of learning delay, or about a third of a typical school year.

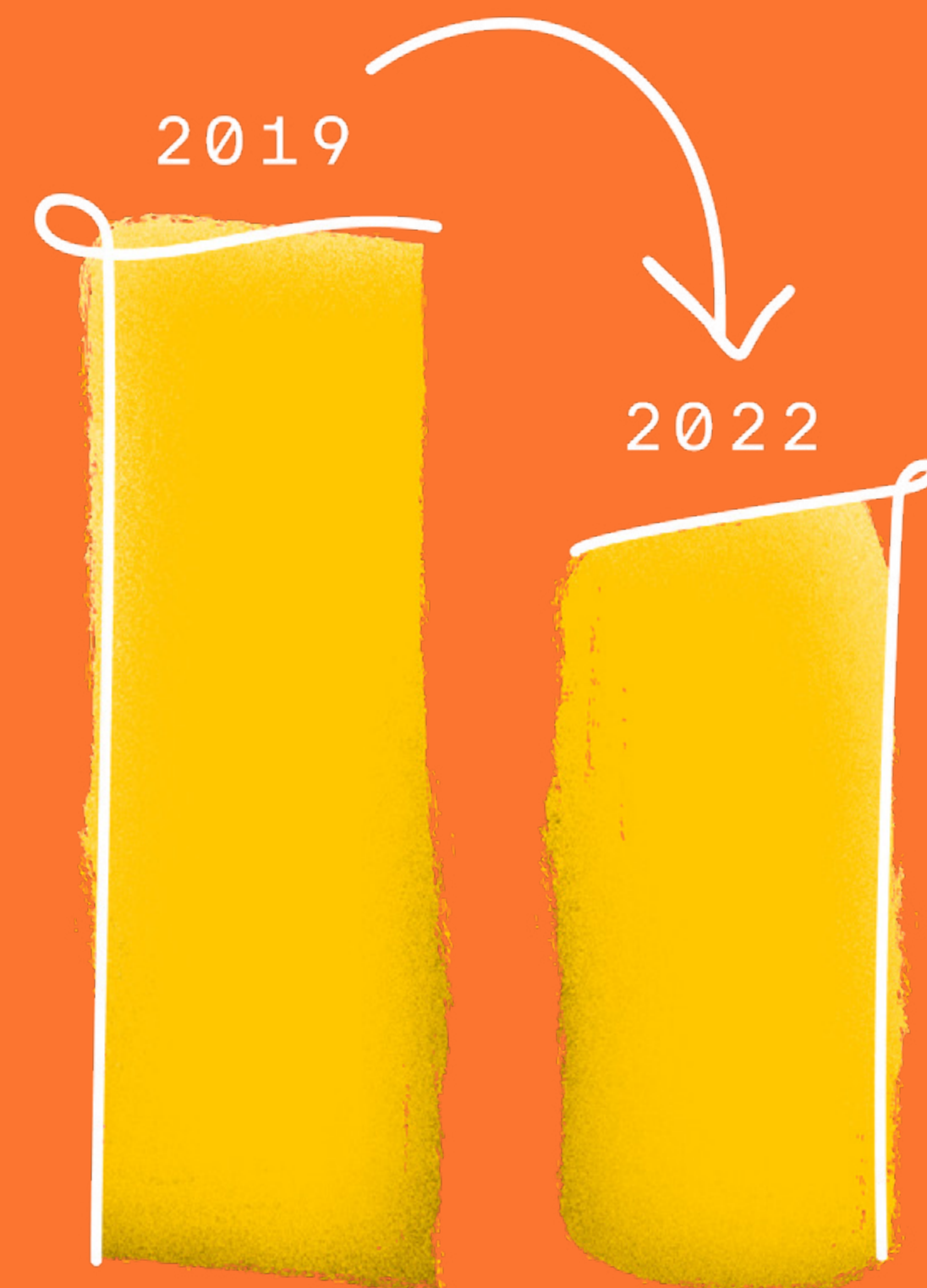
[NAEP Highlights](#)

Math score trends showed:

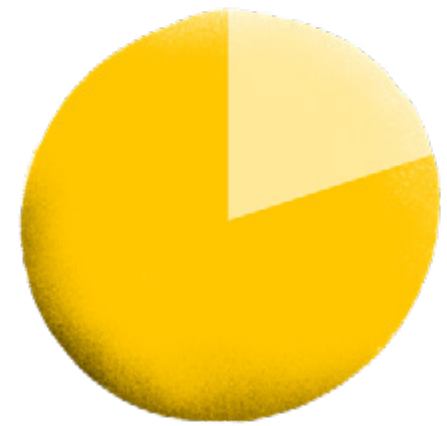
The average math score for fourth graders was 5 points lower than in 2019 and was lower than all previous assessment years going back to 2005.

The average math score for eighth graders was 8 points lower than in 2019 and was lower than all previous assessment years going back to 2003.

[NAEP Mathematics](#)

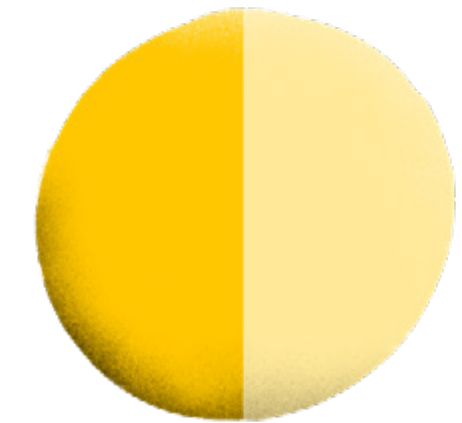


A 2023 Gradient Learning Poll of over 400 educators revealed:



80%

of teachers say they are concerned about their students' engagement in classroom-based learning.

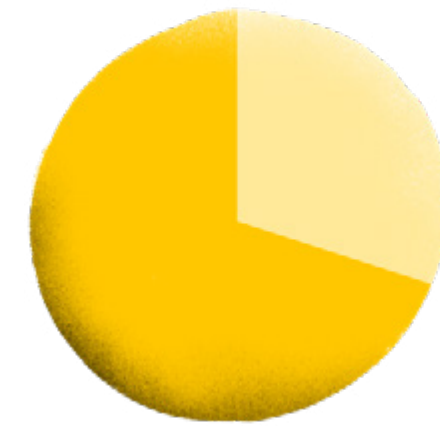


50%

The 2021-22 Speak Up Research Project found that half of all students said that they are not engaged in what they are learning in school most of the time.

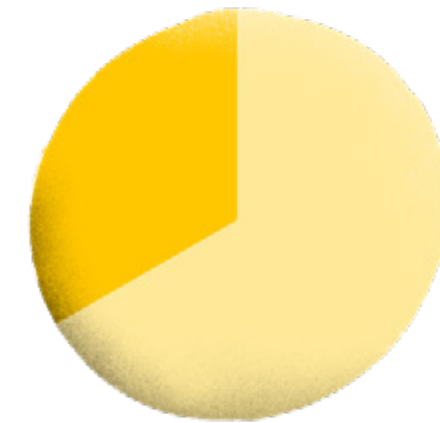
[Gradient Learning poll](#) ↗

And, according to a 2023 survey of educators by the EdWeek Research Center:



70%

of educators say students are misbehaving more now compared with the fall of 2019.



33%

A third of educators say students have been misbehaving "a lot more" compared with before the pandemic.

[EdWeek survey](#) ↗



Can school leaders shift the dynamic for our students to succeed? Yes, indeed!

It starts by understanding the needs of your distinct student population.

Questions for school leaders: If you're ready to build an action plan for a thriving community, think about the following questions: What are you noticing about your students' engagement during your classroom walkthroughs? Do you have a systematic way to prioritize building relationships across your school? What baseline data are you collecting about student sense of belonging? Do your teachers know where their students need the most support? And, do your students have an adult at school they can go to for that support?

Bridge the connection gap

As educators and school leaders, we want to help all of our students become their best selves.

And doing that starts by creating an environment at school built on trust, where students feel connected to their teachers. Just think about what our school communities would feel like if students showed up each day primed to learn and engaged in the classroom.

We're here to tell you that there is a solution that you can take into action. And that solution involves closing what we call the Connection Gap between teachers and students—that is, a lack of foundational relationships that drive engagement.

According to the Search Institute, youth may not perceive that they have strong relationships with their teachers. In fact, young people reported that of all the relationships in their lives, the ones with their teachers ranked as the least strong (when compared to other relationships including parenting adults, friends, program leaders, and siblings).

[Search Institute](#) 



Research tells us that when students have positive relationships with their teachers, they are more likely to feel more motivated and engaged in school, develop positive social and emotional competencies, and perform better academically.

[Cornelius-White, 2007](#)

[Gehlbach et al., 2016](#)

[Osher et al., 2018](#)

[Kraft et al., 2003](#)

The majority of educators also say that they believe building stronger teacher-student connections (78%) and leveraging students' personal interests and passions within learning (65%) can help engage students.

Students directly report that when they have strong teacher relationships, they feel included, engaged, and motivated in school. And, when teachers and students have strong relationships built on a foundation of trust, it can help students feel confident in sharing their voice. According to a recent Gradient Learning report:

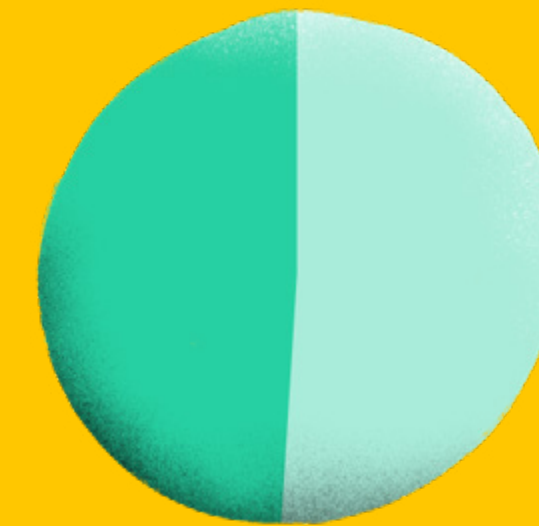
Of students surveyed who indicated that they have a strong relationship with a teacher in the classroom, 70% or more said that they pay attention or participate in class more and look forward to and enjoy class.

Almost half of students (49%) would prefer to connect with a teacher individually, though nearly a third (31%) of students are not having these regular check-ins.



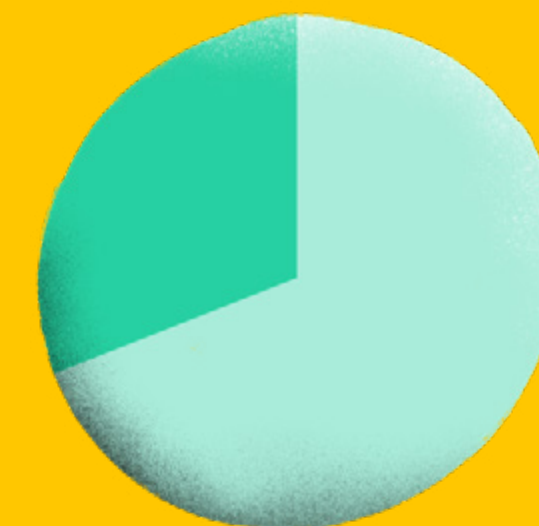
70%

of students with strong teacher relationship look forward to class



49%

of students prefer to connect individually



31%

of students aren't having regular check-ins



Research also shows that when students have a say in their learning experiences, they are likely to develop stronger life skills and have an increased sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence.

[Mager and Nowak, 2012](#) 

[Conner, Posner, and Nsowaa, 2022](#) 

There are some major factors that contribute to the Connection Gap, including lack of time, the need to serve a large number of students, and lack of resources for teachers to engage students. If you're an educator or school leader, you know that today's schools may not be designed to overcome these barriers.

There is a path forward... bringing the knowledge and research together into practical application in the classroom. It's easier than you think to transform

your school community, overcome the Connection Gap, and help students become more motivated.

School leader tip: As you go through the steps in this eBook, consider how to track and measure impact at your school or district.

Arrow down, click next, or turn the page to learn about a 5-step plan you can follow—starting today!

STEP 1

Set a vision to build school culture

So, how can education leaders begin to address the very real challenges in today's schools? It starts by creating a common goal that is attainable for your entire staff.

Step 1: Set a vision to build school culture

A cornerstone of a positive school culture is teacher-student connections. That's because when school leaders empower teachers to create stronger bonds with their students, they build the foundation that leads to positive outcomes for their students and their school community.

We've talked to school leaders around the country who agree that emphasizing connections in their school community is a powerful starting point for transformation:

Not only that—there are experts who have studied the importance of regular teacher-student connections. **Check out these studies to learn more!**

[Search Institute](#)



Relationship building should be the absolute number one priority for any adult who is going to have students in the classroom. Teacher-student connections open doors to support academic effort and learning in the classroom.

Will Ruffin, II
Executive Director of Equity and Engagement, Rochester Public Schools



I made it a priority to put relationships first and people first. That's something that I always tell my staff. We're always going to put people first, and the content will come.

Tanis Griffin
School Leader, Thompson Intermediate School





It's one thing to set a vision—but it's another to have full buy-in.

Setting a school-wide, or even district-wide, vision requires that everyone is on the same page. Consider using a weekly staff meeting to talk about vision setting and relationship building, and encourage all staff to participate.

And, don't stop there. School culture and creating connections should be a regular part of professional development and staff communication. Think about ways to consistently incorporate connection-building activities to influence a positive school environment. Read on to learn about a specific solution that can help.

STEP 2

Model a system for creating connections

Once you've set a vision around a positive school culture and your staff is on board, you need a method to help educators bring it into the classroom. And that method needs to be easy to use and understand—because educators have a lot on their plates!

Step 2: Model a system for creating connections

At an upcoming meeting, let staff know that you're going to have some fun by getting to know each other a bit better in just a few minutes. Consider using a free tool like Along to help. Share with staff

a bit about what Along does—it's a free teacher-student connection builder that helps quickly build the strong ties needed to create and maintain trust year-round, creating a foundation for positive outcomes for students and their school community.

Although Along was built for teachers and students to connect, for this exercise it will allow you to choose from a collection of research-informed questions that are made to open lanes of conversation.



In Along, you can try something fun by asking a question like,

What's one thing that will brighten your day?

or something a bit more thought-provoking like,

What traditions matter to you? Why are they important to you?

Encourage staff to turn to each other and answer the question.

Once educators see how much you can learn about each other with a quick conversation starter, consider other ways that you can model connections with your staff such as:

Add a reflection question to morning announcements.

Post a question in a place where your staff gather.

After you've integrated these questions into some of your school or district routines with staff, you can work together to bring the practice into the classroom with your students.

Using Along, educators can get to know their students as individuals and as learners—just like you modeled with staff. Along was built for teachers to connect with their students both inside and outside the classroom.

School leader tip: A whole-school (or whole-district) commitment to building connections is all about consistency. Set clear expectations and provide an approach to relationship development that is attainable for your staff. Check out how this can work, class-by-class, by reading Step 3.



STEP 3

Implement a specific plan at your school

After vision-setting as a team, and showing your staff how asking simple questions can spark community, continue having honest conversations about the value of relationship-building with your team. This is an investment that has huge pay-offs!

And then, show them more about Along—a solution specifically built to address this challenge in the classroom.

Step 3: Implement a specific plan at your school

We know that time is truly of the essence in each school day. Educators around the country have shared with us that they have so much to accomplish each day that it can be difficult to add “just one more thing.” The workaround? A free, built-for-you solution like Along allows educators to take clear and consistent action.

After you’ve followed Steps 1 and 2, it’s time to build teacher-student connections into your school week by using Along as a key component of your plan. Show your educator team that it’s fast and easy to use!

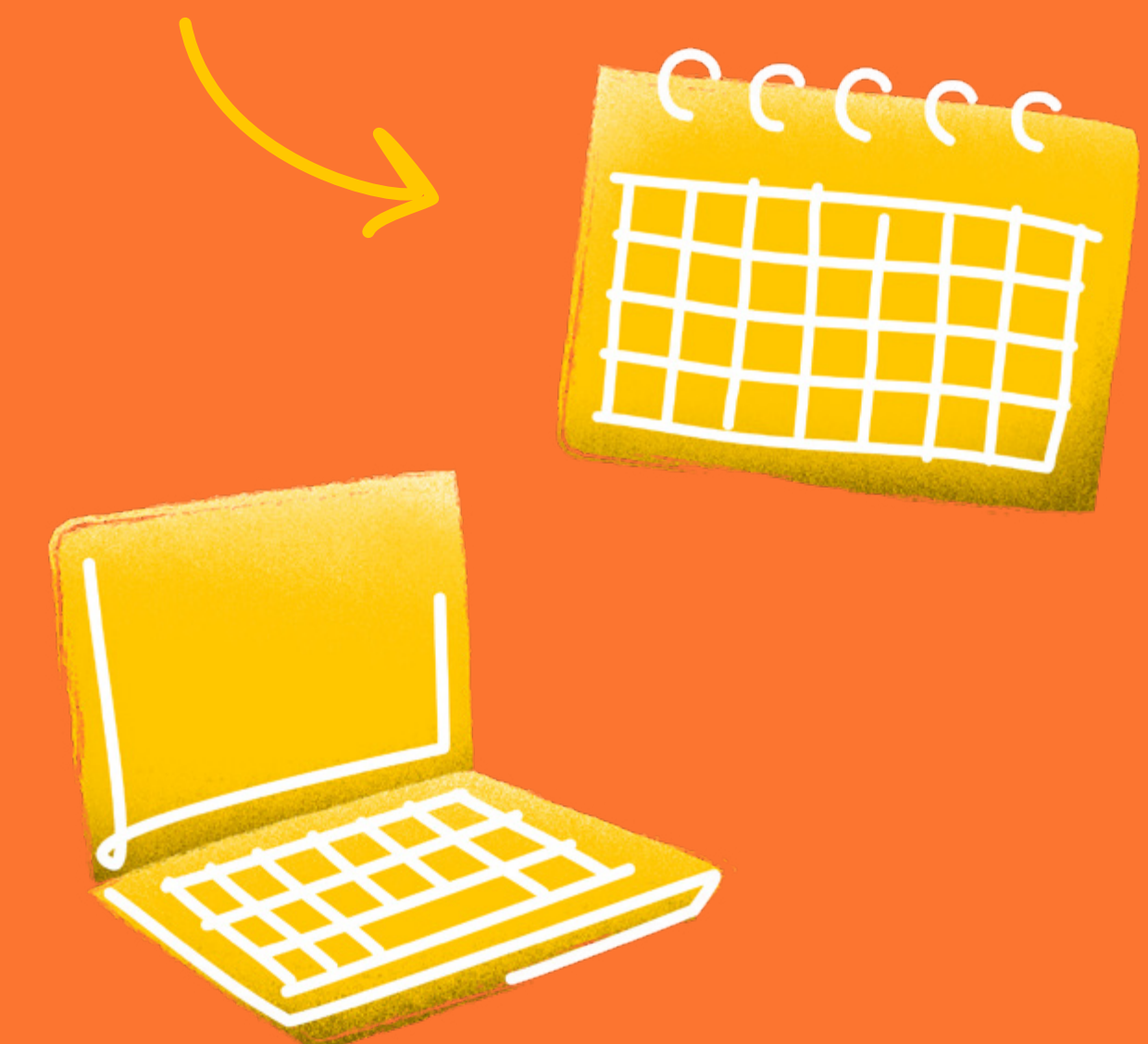
Use this customizable slide deck to share more about Along with your staff.

[Slide deck](#) 

Ensure that each educator makes their own free Along account.

Create a school-wide calendar, or have educators use this customizable planning calendar to think through their connection-building strategy in their classrooms—whether it’s homeroom/ advisory and/or academic classes—Along can be used in a variety of settings!

[Planning calendar](#) 



Our team at Along is also here to help get your staff onboarded and ready to go. Reach out to us at support@along.org any time!

Email support [↗](#)



We onboarded our staff on Along during some of our professional development time. Then, we took a very specific approach to help easily integrate the tool into teachers' lesson plans. I created a customized calendar for our staff that is sent via email, which suggests when to send their Along reflection question and when to do the corresponding classroom activity for the next several months."

Middle School Counselor



STEP 4

Create a space for student voice year round

Now, your school can be off to the races!

Using Along, your educators can quickly build the strong ties needed to create and maintain trust year-round. As they are getting to know Along, they'll notice a variety of question types they can use in any classroom environment, whether it's a homeroom/advisory or a core academic class, like math or history.

Just by asking students questions about who they are, how they learn, and what matters most to them, educators can start to build safe, inclusive classroom environments... which brings us to Step 4!

Step 4: Create a space for student voice year round

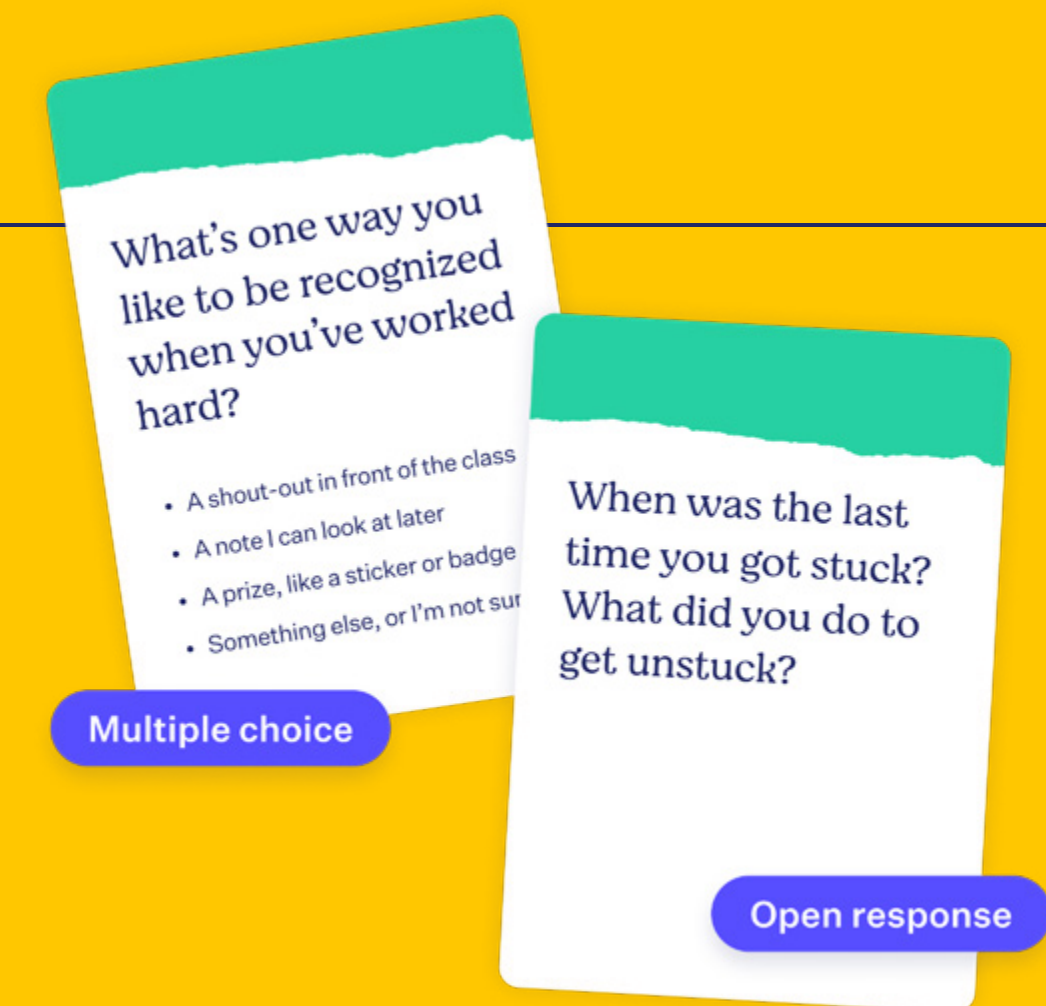
By regularly using Along's reflection questions in your school classrooms,

students feel more comfortable opening up about what truly matters to them.

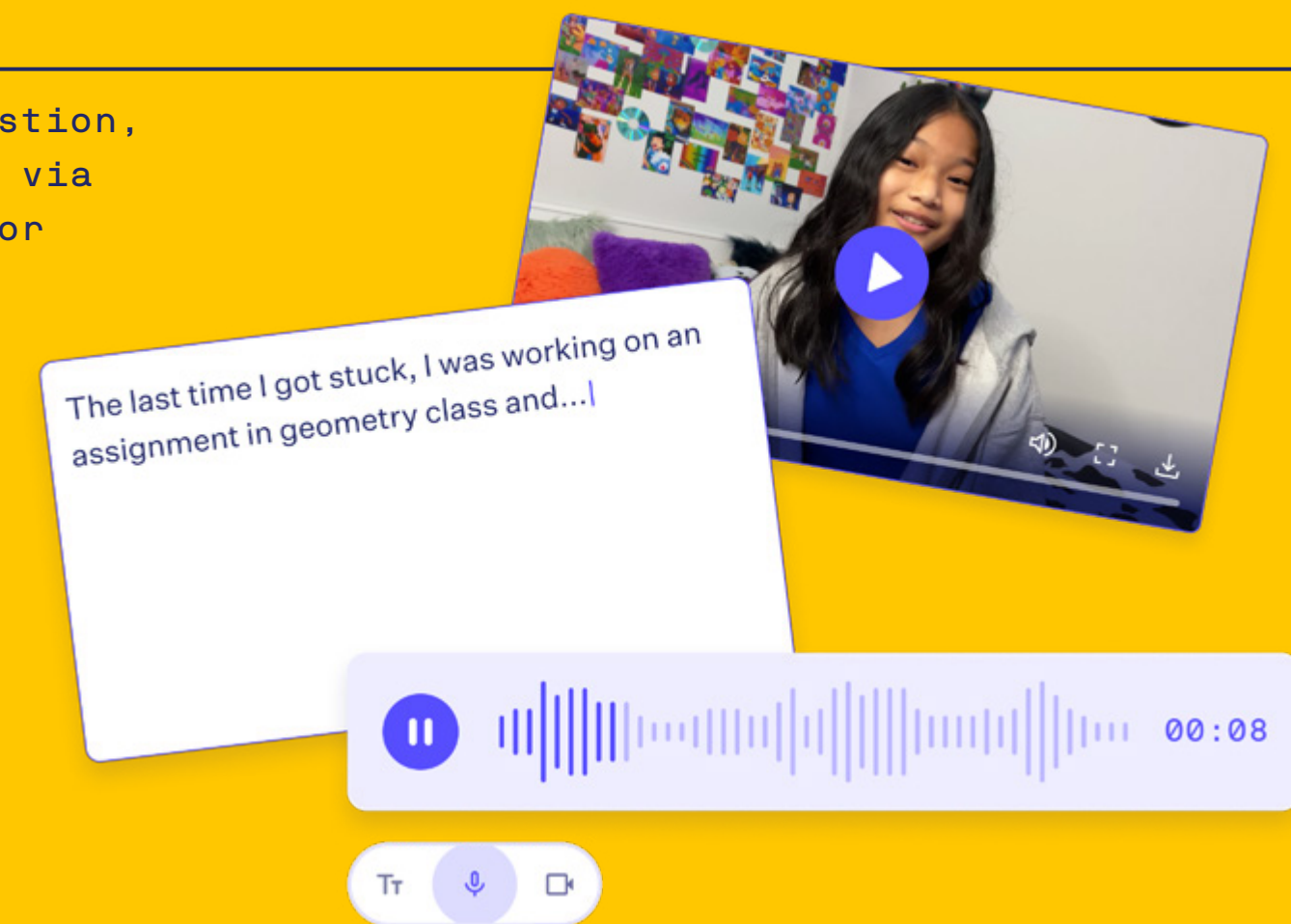
Educators can understand their students and how they learn best, and build trust in the classroom. By starting with getting-to-know-you questions—and then throughout the year connecting over questions related to community, belonging, critical thinking, and instructional improvement—educators can maintain that trust and incorporate student voice into their classroom topics.

School leader tip: In the early weeks of using Along, advise educators to build the foundation of a strong relationship by sparking a connection with a question like, "What do you usually do after school?" or "Who in your life do you want to make proud? Why?" Remember that students are inspired when educators share their answers first! They love to hear what their teachers were like as students themselves.

Along offers questions to help teachers learn more about their students as individuals and as learners.



Depending on the question, students can respond via audio, text, video, or multiple choice.





Get to know students even more by engaging in-person with group discussions and hands-on lessons.



Inform your own pedagogy with problem-solving solutions related to mindsets and well-being.

Within Along, you'll also find classroom activities and educator practice resources to help take what you've learned from your students to fuel more conversations and inspire more effective learning throughout your school.

All of Along's reflection questions, classroom activities, and teacher resources were designed to build and deepen student relationships in service of learning. We worked with researchers, experts in the field, teachers, and students to create and review content to ensure inclusivity for all students and their identities. Our partners—including Black Teacher Collaborative, Character Lab, Greater Good Science Center, Griptape, Re-Imagining Migration, Search Institute, Teach Plus, Transcend, Understood, and UnidosUS—provided expertise in key areas including: 1) usability and accessibility; 2) racial and cultural affirmation; 3) teacher perspective; and 4) youth perspective.

School leader tip: Continue to explore Along with your educators by connecting over reflection questions as a team. The whole library offers options that ask students what they think—but take a closer look at the “Invite input” questions in particular. These questions ask students for suggestions, helping them take ownership of their learning and their community. You can model these questions with your teachers before they introduce it in their classrooms with their students.

STEP 5

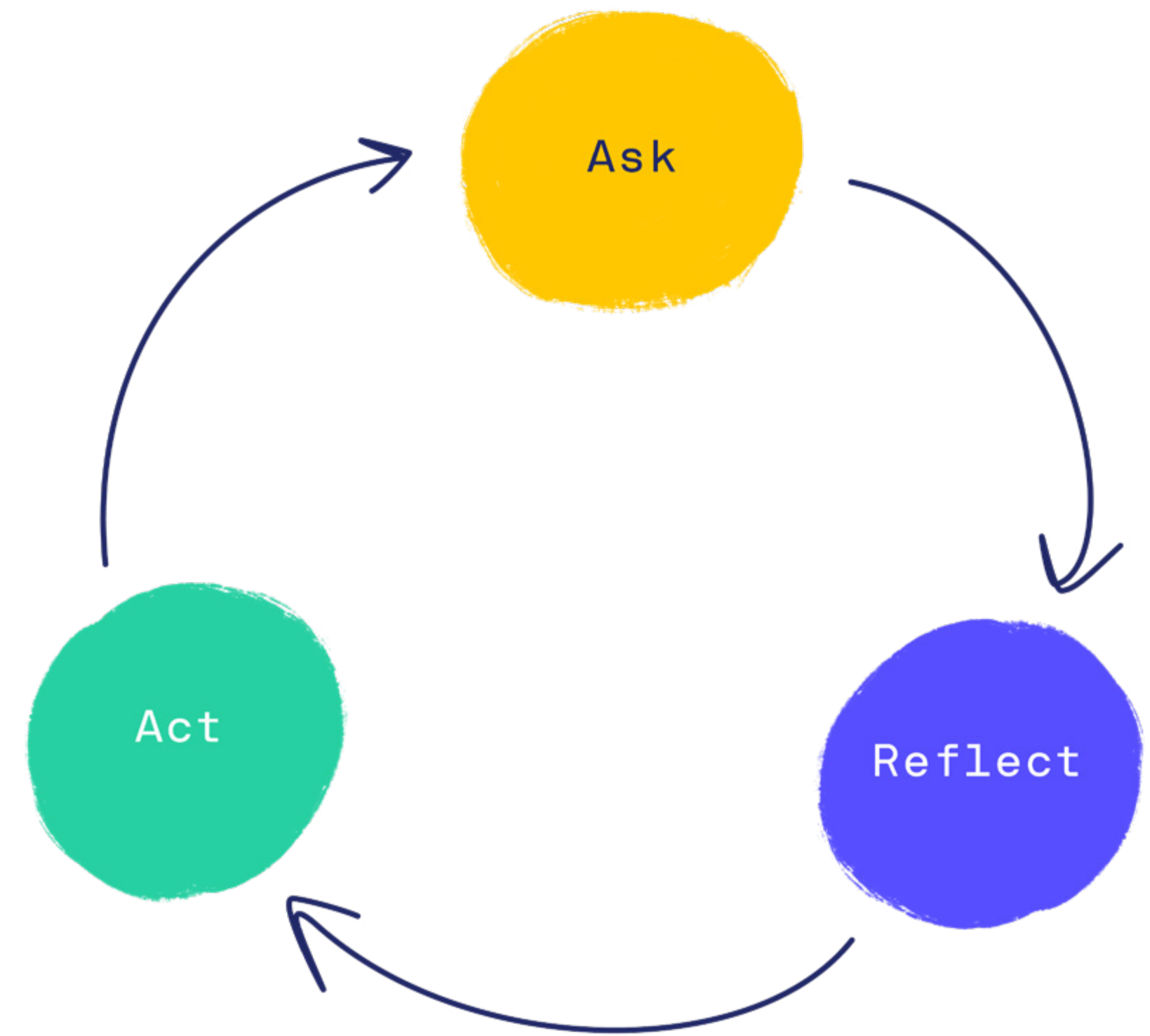
Use student input for effective, inclusive classrooms

As you consistently hear from your students, you'll have the opportunity to make direct adjustments in the classroom based on their inputs. We call this cycle: Ask. Reflect Act.

Once students understand and start using the open paths of communication you offer, the insights they provide will serve a number of purposes. You can learn if certain lessons resonate, you can connect over current events or happenings at your school, and you can check-in via fun topics. Every time you ask a question, you'll get regular inputs from your students as well as insights for your instruction.

Building an inclusive classroom is a living and breathing process that lasts beyond the start of the academic year.

Using Along, you can figure out if you're making the progress you want to see in the classroom. If you get positive inputs from students, celebrate that as a point of validation to keep teachers motivated year round. If your students are giving you mixed responses, act on these signals to make classrooms more inclusive and your school culture more connected. And when the changes that happen in life occur to your teachers and students, they'll have someone they trust at school to maintain resilience in the face of adversity.



Idea for your educators:

When your students engage in heads-down work, think about inviting them to answer this question, “**What helps you focus when you’re working?**” to better understand their own needs. First, ask each student to commit to trying one technique in a few working sessions and jotting down a reflection. For example, a student might listen to calm music during a study session and record a few thoughts afterward about how it went. If things didn’t work as well as students hoped, encourage them to try experimenting until they have a routine they’re satisfied with.

School leader tip: School leaders play a critical role in keeping the vision going at their campus or district. Make sure to follow up with your educators throughout the school year to hear about what’s working in their classrooms, to look at the real-time data to help track and measure impact, and to help them adjust classroom practices to meet student needs. Ask about which questions are resonating with your teachers and also ask students which questions they’ve liked best. Building connections means you’re part of the process, too!



See the impacts

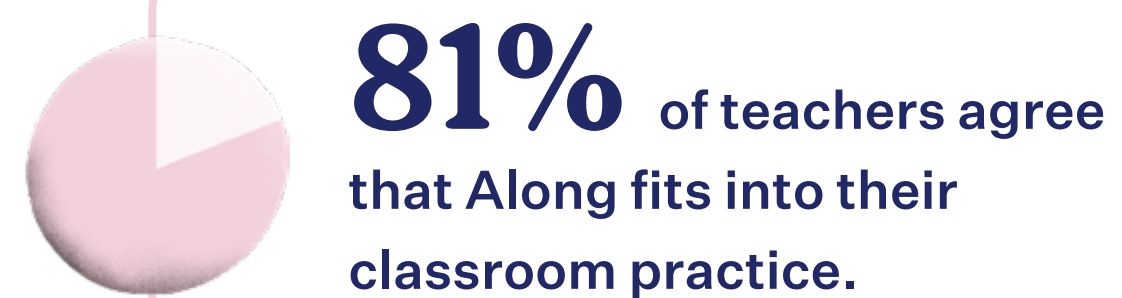
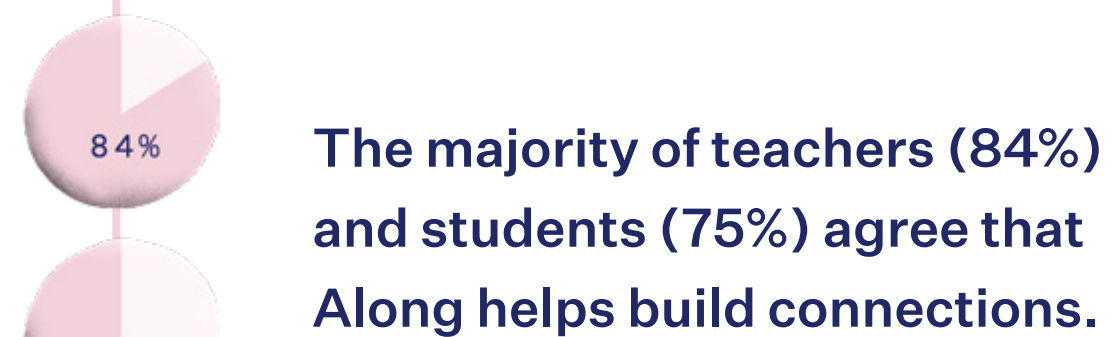
Schools around the country that use Along are benefitting with positive shifts in their school culture and student outcomes.

For example, at Rochester Public Schools in Minnesota, teachers and students were surveyed after a three-month Along pilot. Here are some of the results:



[Rochester case study](#)

And, in a survey of Along teachers and students in spring 2023:

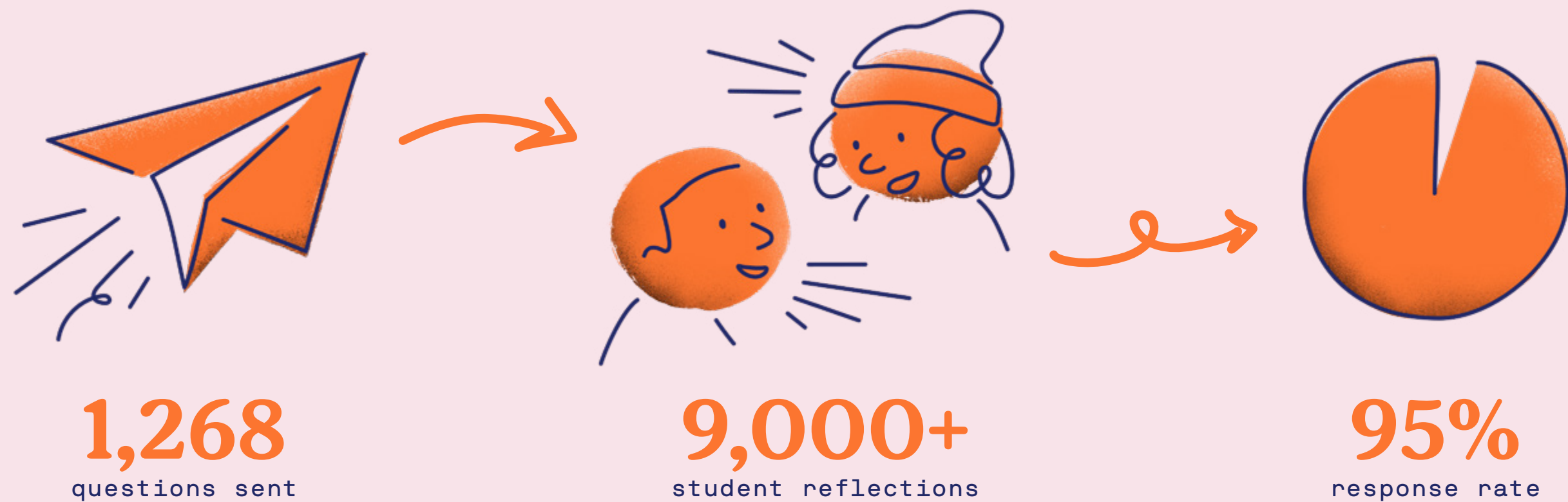


[CZI Newsroom](#)



At Thompson Intermediate School in Houston, Texas, educators sent 1,268 reflection questions using Along over the course of a school year—leading to more than 9,000 response reflections and a 95% response rate by students.

Create Connection [↗](#)



“We’re noticing a cultural change in school. We’re building relationships and students are happier to be at school because they know someone is going to check in with them. [Along] is going to set students up for success.”

Middle School Teacher

“Along feels like the FaceTime call you have with someone you trust. Whether it’s about a class, a show I’m watching, or something stressing me out in my life, Along allows my teacher to be there for me in the way I need it.”

High School Student

It's about teacher well-being, too

And by the way, when there are strong teacher-student relationships at school, it isn't just the students who benefit. Educators also reap the rewards.

When educators have the ongoing opportunity to form authentic connections with their students, they are more likely to find joy in their work.

According to a Gradient Learning Poll, which surveyed 639 teachers and school leaders from across the U.S.:

The vast majority (80%) of teachers claim they feel more job satisfaction when they are supporting students beyond just academic development. This includes helping students grow as whole people by supporting them academically, emotionally, and cognitively.

A majority of teachers (73%) and school leaders (80%) believe that fostering a school culture of positivity and collaboration is a “very valuable” potential solution to address the teacher retention crisis.

[The Great Teacher Resignation](#) ↗



Further, a recent study at the University of Missouri found that positive teacher-student relationships can lead to better teaching.

Students who reported having more positive relationships with their teachers also reported that their teachers used more high-impact teaching practices linked with student academic achievement. These practices include: sparking cognitive engagement, critical thinking and problem solving, helping students follow along from one topic to the next, and making curriculum interesting and relevant).

The study indicated that one way to activate these teaching practices is to promote caring teacher-student relationships.

[Science Direct](#) 

Ready to get started with Along? Keep reading to find out how!



Human interactions are important in building a learning community. Building these networks of connection is not only important for social connection and building relationships, but also to build routines and interactions that we can later use in learning activities where we can learn together and lean on each other.”

High School Teacher



Start transforming your school

Using Along at your school is completely free!

You can get started in just a few clicks. We provide free help at every step of the way, including premium services from data reporting to professional development resources.

Reach out to support@along.org today or visit along.org/for-schools/.

We can't wait for you to take these 5 Steps to Transform Your School Into a Community!

[Along packages](#) ↗

[Along for schools](#) ↗



5 step checklist

Want to turn your school into a community? Here are the five steps you can take to make a difference today:

- Step 1: Set a vision to build school culture**
Connect with staff around the power of teacher-students connections.

- Step 2: Model a system for creating connections**
Show your team the impact of a practical routine to build relationships.

- Step 3: Implement a specific plan at your school**
Introduce a manageable solution for relationship building with clear actions and calendar planning.

- Step 4: Create a space for student voice year-round**
Encourage opportunities to engage around class-by-class student insights.

- Step 5: Use student inputs for effective, inclusive classrooms**
Adjust and inform teaching practice based on responses from students.



This eBook is brought to you by the Along team.

About Along:

[Along](#) is a teacher-student connection builder provided at no cost by [Gradient Learning](#), a nonprofit organization founded and led by educators who are driven to bring communities, schools, and families together in pursuit of meeting the needs of every student. Using simple, yet powerful, reflection questions, Along helps to solve the connection gap between teachers and their students by fostering authentic conversations. It has earned the [iKeepSafe FERPA and COPPA privacy badges](#) in recognition of its alignment with privacy, safety, and security best practice guidelines, and was a [Common Sense Best Tools for Back to School 2022](#), one of [6 Ed Tech Tools to Try in 2023](#) by Cult of Pedagogy, and a finalist for a [2023 CODiE Award for Best Student Experience](#). With the support of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Gradient Learning partners with communities, schools, and educators to create solutions—such as the [Summit Learning](#) program and Along—to meet the holistic needs of every student while fostering success for all.

About the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative:

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative was founded in 2015 to help solve some of society’s toughest challenges—from eradicating disease and improving education, to addressing the needs of our communities. Through collaboration, providing resources and building technology, our mission is to help build a more inclusive, just and healthy future for everyone. For more information, please visit chanzuckerberg.com.