

Fostering Friendships and Healthy Interactions

Planning Commission Study - April 2025

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Objective

This study will focus on gathering ideas and best practices to promote positive peer interactions among students. Beyond a traditional PBIS model, how do other school communities (both public and private) help foster friendships & healthy social interactions within schools to reduce bullying and build connections? What do our buildings currently have in place? What fun traditions or exciting new methods can enhance our grade-level experience as students begin in a new building?

Process

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- Website and generative AI research
 - Interviews with administrators of all three buildings in Madeira
 - Interviews with counselors Madeira Elementary, Middle, and High Schools
 - Interviews with educators and counselors in various neighboring schools (Mariemont, Indian Hill, Wyoming, Moeller, Ursuline Academy, St. Xavier, and Summit Country Day School)

Research Behind the Importance of Fostering Friendships within Schools and Among Students

Besides their families, school is an important microsystem that significantly influences children's social, cognitive, and emotional development. Schools provide opportunities for children to interact with peers and adults, learn social skills, and develop a sense of belonging. Structured classroom learning environments foster cognitive growth. Peer support also affects overall health and well-being, including emotional and behavioral engagement with school.

Studies have found that children with a higher number of friends are less likely to be lonely and more likely to like and be engaged in school. Peer acceptance has been shown to relate positively to GPA in middle school and high school. For example, a 2024 study on 717 junior high school students [in China] showed that peer relationships were directly and significantly related to junior high school students' academic achievement, and that peer relationships were indirectly and positively related to junior high school students' academic achievement via learning motivation and learning engagement respectively.¹

Aside from academic benefits, positive peer relationships can also help develop important social skills such as communication and conflict resolution and reduce stress and anxiety

¹ <https://bmcpsychology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40359-024-01780-z#:~:text=Peer%20relationships%20and%20academic%20achievement,-Previous%20research%20has&text=Jacobson%20and%20Burdsal%20found%20that,'%20academic%20achievement%20%5B11%5D>

levels, contributing to overall life satisfaction. For example, a 2023 study of 650 [Romanian] students aged 9-12 years showed a direct positive effect of the perceived number of friends on children's life satisfaction.² Moreover, positive peer relationships can help make children more resilient even when they face difficulties at home. Even having just one close friend can be enough to have a positive effect.

With the increased use of mobile smartphones among adolescent children, more schools are adopting a cell phone ban or restrictions during school hours to reduce distraction and increase connection. While there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, general results have shown increased focus, improved concentration, and less drama. Teachers report that students turn to each other and talk, ask questions with their homework, and the classroom environment becomes livelier and interactive.³

A note about IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act):

While the goal of IDEA is to ensure special education and related services are available to children with disabilities in public schools, it does not specify what type of general education setting is required to support their learning. Studies show that integrating students with disabilities into classrooms and activities (including sports), with non-disabled students not only benefits students with disabilities but students who are non-disabled as well.⁴

Current Best Practices

While there are many activities and events that bring students together on a regular basis, schools can foster healthy friendships by incorporating a variety of teacher-led classroom activities, school-wide/grade-level events, weekend retreats, and even one-day workshops.

² <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10219606/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/10/nx-s1-5105976/indiana-school-cellphone-ban-students-teachers>

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/09/nx-s1-5234657/special-education-integration-disabilities-school>

Teachers play an essential role in helping students form friendships since they are in regular contact with them. School-wide/grade-level events provide an opportunity for all students in the same and across grade levels to engage and bond over a shared activity outside the general classroom environment. Many of the top public and private schools in the U.S. offer weekend retreats and one-day workshops that focus on connection, leadership, personal growth, and friendships. These programs often incorporate team-building, vulnerability, and shared experiences.

See Appendix for list of examples.

Community Events

While regular school events and activities play a vital role in developing student relationships, community events can significantly impact friendships by creating opportunities for students to interact with peers outside the classroom setting, fostering a sense of belonging beyond the classroom walls. This also allows them to connect based on shared interests and shared experiences, connect across grade levels, and strengthen a sense of community when participating with other neighbors and families. Current community events include:

- Madeira City hosts a wiffle ball league throughout the summer, a “splash party” for middle school students at the end of summer, and various other community events throughout the year. (see Madeira City website for more information)
- Rec leagues (baseball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, lacrosse)
- Madeira Public Library hosts various general, STEM, and craft events throughout the year. (see Madeira Public Library website for more information)

Parent Bonding

In some cases, children form friendships with each other through parent interaction. Schools can help foster parent friendships by creating structured opportunities and opportunities that involve families.

- Parent volunteer opportunities (inside and outside the classroom)
- Classroom meet-and-greet at the beginning of the school year

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- Family events (ie. back-to-school picnic, movie night, etc.)
 - Parent education workshops
 - Online platform (ie. social media group pages)
 - PTO events and volunteer opportunities

Current Activities at MES

- World Kindness Day [doc](#)
- Wellness Wednesday - once a month a counselor comes into each classroom to teach a lesson on a character trait of the month.
- Reading Buddies connect older students with younger ones to read together
- High School One-On-One program: high school students mentor elementary students
- Counselors host groups on friendship
- SHAC (Student Health Advisory Council) organize assemblies to promote self-care
- Beginning Buddies to help connect new students
- New families ice cream party
- Facebook group parent pages by grade level
- Kindergarten popsicle event

Current Activities at MMS

- 6th Grade trip to Camp Kern for team building
- 6th Grade wellness class now includes social-emotional health with a focus on how to interact with and respond to peers in a healthy way
- 7th Grade interdisciplinary units mix groups of students with a grade-level focus (Empty Bowls, March Madness)
- 8th Grade multi-day trip to Washington, D.C. has been moved to the fall to encourage bonding among students

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- 8th Grade Magnified Giving
 - Increased clubs and activities for all middle school students, including Art Club, Buddy Club, Calligraphy Club, Chess Club, Community Service Club, and Culture Club
 - Girls on the Run
 - Math Counts
 - Middle School Musical
 - Sources of Strength program, including It Starts with Hello and the Gratitude Campaign; Sponsored Pack the Stands (tailgate and attend the game) for volleyball and football to encourage participation and supporting one another
 - LIGHT House system: Students are grouped across grade levels and participate in various activities that promote leadership, integrity, generosity, honesty, and teamwork. There are several LIGHT days throughout the year
 - Lunch Bunch: facilitated by the counselor, school psychologist, and SLP to promote social skills and positive peer interactions among students who may be struggling with this
 - PTO-sponsored socials (February Winter Fest for grades 6, 7, 8)
 - Color Run
 - Technology: Phones and smartwatches are not used during the school day; 8th graders may not use phones during the time between return from world languages and the start of their day at MMS to encourage face-to-face interaction

Current Activities at MHS

- Expanded transition activities for 8th - 9th grade, including promoting experiences with classmates to create memories and provide opportunities for shared experiences
 - Freshman Showcase in the Fall

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- Interactive Freshman Orientation (small groups, tours led by upper-class leaders, student government connecting with freshmen to offer support)
 - Student Government led activities to engage peers and promote positive interactions
 - High Five Fridays
 - Back to School picture taking
 - Apple cider and hot chocolate mornings with positive affirmations
 - Sources of Strength
 - It Starts with Hello - students encouraged to connect with someone new through conversation starters
 - What Helps Me - therapy dogs, live concert in auditorium, mindfulness activities
 - Fostering Friendships - social media messaging about positive friendships, PositiviTree
 - Madeira Strong Assembly at the start of the school year
 - Multiple Clubs and Activities (beyond athletics) allow for positive interactions and connections among students in all grade levels
 - Key Club: sharing a common experience through service
 - Day of Service: kids in different groups serving together
 - Bowling Team, Ski Club, Cards, Games Club
 - Lunch Bunch facilitated by assistant student services coordinator and SLP
 - 1:1 Mentoring Program
 - Club Fair offered in the fall
 - Cookies with Counselors for new students
 - GSA Ally event
 - 1 in 5 - helping to erase the stigma of mental health
 - Counselors provide peer mediation
 - Peer tutoring facilitated by counselors to connect 9th and 10th grade students with 11th and 12th grade tutors

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- Foosball table in the cafeteria
 - Technology: Cell phone policy (no phones during class time) helps promote face-to-face interaction

Information from Neighboring Schools

Questions Asked

1. What programs or processes do you have in place to foster friendships?
2. How do you encourage bonding among students outside of/across typical “friend groups”?
3. How do you discourage bullying outside of assemblies or direct instruction?

Mariemont

- Elementary grades use Second Step, an SEL curriculum
- Junior high and high school use Sources of Strength, a program that empowers peer leaders and caring adults to create positive change
- Lunch bunches and social skills groups ensure everyone has the tools and opportunities to build and maintain friendships
- New student orientation includes new students being assigned a buddy
- Mix It Up lunch promotes new friendships by moving students around at lunch
- Kindness Committee organizes various random acts of kindness activities in winter

Indian Hill

- Use Responsive Classroom, a K-8 SEL curriculum
 - focuses on classroom community and care
 - creates healthy relationships and positivity among friends and classmates
 - teaches students to manage emotions, resolve conflict, and communicate effectively
- Has lessons on bullying, but also focuses on a strong culture that encourages a

sense of belonging and community

- Emphasis on proactivity - lots of effort at creating an inclusive and welcoming environment

Wyoming

- Begin the year with "It Starts with Hello," grades K-12
 - teaches empathy and empowers students to end social isolation
 - promotes social inclusivity
- Lunch groups for students who struggle socially or new students
- Take-A-Breath Tuesdays in middle school
 - videos sent out to homerooms each Tuesday (mental health, being a good friend, social pressures, etc)
 - activities to follow
 - allows students to see other sides of each other
- Restorative conversations are a priority
 - teach accountability and strong communication skills

Moeller

- Uses a House System- is an alternative form of student governance where students from all four grades are divided into separate communities called "Houses" containing approximately 150 students. Each House is divided into seven mentor groups led by a mentor teacher and a student mentor captain. Moeller's nationally recognized House System was implemented in 2005 as part of a student-led initiative following a student exchange to Australia. The purpose of the House System is to support all aspects of student life in the Marianist tradition. The goals are to enhance pastoral care by providing each student with at least three significant adults – a House Dean, a mentor teacher, and a counselor – who monitor and supports their academic, social, and spiritual growth

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- To foster community and build better relationships between students and faculty
 - To provide increased leadership opportunities for all students

The Marianist Cup is awarded annually to the House which accumulates the most points in various events and competitions that are academic, social, community service, athletic, and school-spirit oriented. Our House System gives him over 100 leadership opportunities

- Archbishop Moeller High School has been working toward one Mission – Catholic. Marianist. Forming our Students into Remarkable Men. These are men of faith, men of academic excellence, and men of character.
- Retreats- Freshman retreat, Sophomore retreat, Junior retreat, and Kairos retreat
- Service Programs- a variety of programs to serve the community
- Currently, more than 85% of our students are involved in co-curricular activities. Whether it's band, Little Buddies, debate & speech, or the academic team, all Moeller students are encouraged to participate in some activity outside their academic coursework. Students are always encouraged to start clubs to share their interests with others. There are 70 clubs and co-curriculars, from fishing to chess and academic team to the German club.

Ursuline Academy

- Offers a "Welcome to UA" week for incoming freshman the summer before they start at UA where students get introduced to the school and have the chance to meet other students.
- Freshman orientation day before the start of school that incorporates many community building activities.
- Each grade has an annual retreat incorporating faith, community building, and leadership.

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- Grade-level community days as needed if we feel like the class is struggling to build community or is fractured in some way.
 - Offer many sports, clubs, plays/musicals, community service offerings, etc. to build community/friendships
 - “Mix it up” days in the cafeteria.
 - Drives/competitions between the grades and houses (4 house system). For example, the Christmas Hope gift drive, and in the Spring, a canned food drive. Both are competitions for spirit points among the 4 grades and are friendly competitions that promote bonds within the classes. Throughout the year, we also have “spirit games/events” where students earn points for their grade or house by attending the spirit events to support their classmates.
 - Offer many service events after school and have special service days throughout the year where students of all grades get together to serve in the community.
 - No tolerance bullying policy discussed regularly in religion class
 - If bullying happens within a grade, we have had a “community day” where we have led community-building activities. The class faculty moderator is involved and works with the class co-presidents to develop a plan to address any issues.

St. Xavier

- Catholic Mission -there is an understanding that the St. X community will make people know and feel that they are all gifted and special in some way. The overall message amongst staff/school is that all are loved and cared for: “you have a gift, celebrate it and use it with yourself and others and God”.
- Variety of summer camps (sports, etc.) for younger students before they are high school students, so boys can come together over the years and make friends/positive connections, and then they know others when they get to St. X.
- St. X offers LOTS of extracurricular activities/clubs for every interest so all students can connect with others. There are almost 90 clubs!
- [Graduate at Graduation](#) concept: *Open to Growth, Intellectually Competent, Loving, Religious, Committed to Doing Justice*, which supports students being the best version of themselves and in relationships with others.

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- Coaches play a huge role in students developing positive connections and friendships. Coaches can make or break friendships/connections with their attitudes/language, etc. Coaches are training on how to support students, etc.
 - “Bomber Pilots” that seniors can apply for. This is where seniors are placed in the Freshman homerooms (4-5 in each) as role models to be there for freshmen who are learning the ropes and getting an understanding of high school. These Bomber Pilots can see who is struggling, maybe needs a friend, or is seeking connection. They can provide conversation and affirmation to freshmen as a way of support.
 - Any kid who is not involved in something is probably struggling, so they try to keep track of who is not involved.
 - Chaplains for every team (sports, choir, band, theatre, etc.) who work with the coach/leader and have command of what the school represents, what they expect from their students, and how each student is doing. This chaplain meets with the group/team and helps them bond/grow. They can encourage friendships, unity, reflection, etc. This can help bridge gaps (division one recruit and team manager).
 - St. X is awaiting the state policy on cell phones, which should help with student bonding. Students are often on their phones at lunch instead of talking to each other.
 - They have various service programs and mission trips that build connections with students because it is outside of their normal peer groups.
 - Teachers are the main resource for bullying support, but it is said not to be an issue at St. Xavier.

Summit Country Day School

- Grades 1-4 are grouped outside of homeroom classes for specials to help encourage friendships and connections outside of just their classroom/homeroom
- Grades 5-8 are assigned to an “advisement” which meets each day and is a smaller group than the regular class size.
 - Each advisement is assigned an adult to lead and connect with daily
 - Advisements are for logistical and community-building purposes

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- Small advisements help students to be known to each other and adults in the building
 - A House system starts in middle school and groups students together for community-building activities
 - Leaders of Character is a framework embedded throughout the school with the goal of all students working to embody three behaviors, one of which is “building community”
 - Lunchtime “mixed up” seating
 - Parent Ambassadors help connect new students and families to the Summit community and with other parents. They may arrange for a new family to meet up with 2-3 other families over the summer, and then those families serve as mentors to help the new family and student get involved

Counselor Feedback

The counselors at all three schools were asked for their ideas on fostering positive interactions between students. The following is their feedback:

Madeira Elementary School

The counselors recommend a “buddy bench” on the playground where students can go if they are having difficulty finding peers to spend time with during recess. Parent ambassadors for each grade would help new families and students make connections. A family directory would allow parents to help students connect with peers outside of school.

Madeira Middle School

Julia Cabral, counselor at MMS, suggested that more time for LIGHT activities and for LIGHT houses to spend time together could be beneficial. More time for small groups (peer groups for various situations such as grief, divorce, etc), lunch groups, and social groups would be beneficial in fostering connections among peers. Classroom guidance provided

by the counselor on interpersonal communication and community building was also recommended.

Madeira High School

Kristen Duffy, Kim Homer, and Natalie Uihlein, counselors at MHS, suggested that groups to support students such as those going through grief and loss, divorcing parents, chronic illness (diabetes, migraines), a group for girls, a group for boys, students who will be the first in their family to attend college, and friendship groups would be beneficial. They cited time constraints as the main challenge to this. Peer mentoring, such as a Big Buddy/Little Buddy system or students paired by interest, such as theatre or art, could help students build positive connections. This could function almost like a living learning community in college.

Conclusion

Madeira has many effective programs and processes in place to foster friendships and healthy interactions between students. There are various extracurricular activities as well as in-school programs that promote student/peer connections. Time is always a challenge.

Recommendations

District Wide

- Unified Teams
- Adaptive PE
- Promote Madeira City and Madeira Public Library events to encourage community building and connection outside of school
- Partner with Madeira City and Madeira Public Library to offer or suggest additional extracurricular activities and programs as additional ways for students to connect outside of school.

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- Offer training and classroom strategies to teachers that focus on building emotional and social skills.
 - Gatherings (tailgates) for grade-level families before football games (similar to the New Family tailgate)
 - Establish ambassador families to mentor new families throughout their first school year
 - Consider technology policies. Less time on devices during school hours promotes more face-to-face time and opportunities to connect and bond

MES

- “Today’s First Five” to encourage a short, positive interaction as the day starts edtomorrow.com
- “Play club”: scheduled time after or before school for students to gather and play on the playground (could have high school volunteers or parents to facilitate)
- Organized activities that allow students and families to gather outside of school time (for example, snow tubing or sledding in the winter, movie nights, class picnics)
- Implement a House system
- Buddy Bench on the playground
- Grade level team building in the Fall to promote friendships and inclusion
- Sources of Strength

MMS

- Expand the MMS LIGHT “houses” to mix grade-level learning and connection; allow more time for students to spend with their house
- “Today’s First Five” to encourage a short, positive interaction as the day starts edtomorrow.com
- Big Buddy/Little Buddy system

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- “Play club”: scheduled time after or before school for students to gather and play on the playground (could have high school volunteers or parents to facilitate)
 - Organized activities that allow students and families to gather outside of school time (for example, snow tubing or sledding in the winter, movie nights, class picnics)
 - Small groups facilitated by an adult(s) for topics such as changing families (divorce), grief, chronic illness
 - One-day grade level retreats: see Appendix for details
 - Community Building/Team Building events

MHS

- Big Buddy/Little Buddy system
- Continue to limit technology (phone use): keep phones in lockers and out of hands between classes and at lunch to encourage face-to-face interaction
- Host a 1-day weekend workshop either in the summer before the school year begins or early in the first semester geared towards freshmen to build friendships and transition into high school
- Community Building/Team Building events
- Weekend Retreat: see Appendix for details
- Small groups facilitated by an adult(s) for topics such as changing families (divorce), grief, chronic illness, first generation college students
- Alternative Spring Break trip integrating service opportunities

Appendix

Classroom Activities

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- Use icebreaker activities regularly at the beginning and throughout the school year and in new groups so students can get to know each other.
 - Introduce group or peer work early in the semester.
 - Class service project, solving a common problem or assisting others.
 - Provide emotional and social skills training to teachers. Research shows that those who have emotional and social skills training have higher job satisfaction and less burnout, show more positive emotions toward their students, manage their classrooms better, and use more strategies that cultivate empathy and emotion regulation amongst students.
 - Use a regular/daily warm-up question:
 - Students partner with someone new each time and answer personal questions. Range of questions can vary depending on grade level and get more personal as time goes on. For example: "Where would you go on a dream vacation? What's your ideal job? Or What's one thing you're afraid of?"
 - Teacher-led discussion questions. For example, once per month conduct a discussion with students around a specific topic. (Example questions: "What do you consider to be cyberbullying, and what should be the consequences for it?" or "Tell us what's most difficult for you when you're learning something new.") As the school year progresses and trust is gained amongst the students/teacher, questions can get a little deeper to explore more personal issues.
 - In-class activities: Common interest BINGO
 - Encourage "buddy systems" for activities and class assignments
 - Teach students about diversity and friendships, similarities and differences among students in the classroom.
 - Greater Good in Education: Science-based practices
 - [Younger students](#)
 - [Older students](#)

School-wide/grade-level Activities

- "Senior sunrise" - Senior Sunrise" is an annual tradition that marks the beginning of a new school year. During this event, high school seniors gather together to watch

the sunrise as they embark on their last year of high school. (also: Middle school morning meet up)

- Alternative Spring Break trip: Counter to a “traditional” spring break, students engage in travel, volunteering, and community service for the week.
- Service learning trips: Immersive half-day or full-day experiences where students volunteer in different communities to gain a deeper understanding of social issues.

Weekend Retreats

- Kairos Retreat (Jesuit & Catholic Schools)
 - Overview: A multi-day, faith-based retreat (though non-denominational versions exist) focused on self-reflection, personal storytelling, and deep conversations.
 - Activities:
 - Personal reflection & letter writing (e.g., “letters from loved ones”)
 - Small group discussions & vulnerability exercises
 - Leadership talks from seniors, alumni, or faculty
 - Best Practices:
 - Emphasizing trust and confidentiality
 - Having student leaders guide discussions
 - A tech-free environment to foster real connection
- Freshman Retreat (Many Top Private & Boarding Schools)
 - Overview: A one-day or overnight retreat designed to help freshmen build friendships and transition into high school.
 - Activities:
 - “Walk & Talk” deep conversation exercises
 - Team challenges (e.g., ropes courses, problem-solving activities)
 - Campfire-style reflections & affirmations
 - Best Practices:
 - Pairing students with intentional partners (not just their friends)
 - Using storytelling prompts to encourage openness
 - Including a “Letters to Self” exercise for long-term reflection
- The Harkness Retreat (Phillips Exeter & Other Elite Boarding Schools)
 - Overview: Uses the Harkness Method (student-led discussions) in a retreat setting to encourage deep conversations and intellectual connection.
 - Activities:
 - Reflection on personal and academic growth
 - Student-led “Harkness Circles” on big life topics

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- Overnight outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, bonfires)
 - Best Practices:
 - Encouraging deep listening and questioning
 - Keeping group sizes small for meaningful dialogue
 - Integrating journaling & personal reflection
 - Outdoor Leadership Retreat (Common at Top Public Schools)
 - Overview: A mix of physical challenge and emotional connection through outdoor experiences.
 - Activities:
 - High ropes or low ropes team-building exercises
 - Trust falls and guided vulnerability activities
 - Reflection circles around a campfire
 - Best Practices:
 - Designing progressive challenges to build trust
 - Using nature as a setting for deeper reflection
 - Ending with a gratitude-sharing exercise
 - Peer Leadership Retreat (Many Private High Schools & Student Councils)
 - Overview: A retreat designed for upperclassmen to grow as leaders and mentors to younger students.
 - Activities:
 - “If You Really Knew Me” vulnerability exercise
 - Leadership simulation games
 - Guided discussions on mentorship and inclusion
 - Best Practices:
 - Mixing grade levels to encourage mentorship
 - Having alumni share stories of leadership impact
 - Ending with a commitment pledge for positive influence
 - Community & Connection Retreat (Independent & Progressive Schools)
 - Overview: Focuses on building cross-cultural friendships and fostering empathy.
 - Activities:
 - Personal storytelling about identity & experiences
 - “Privilege Walk” or other awareness exercises
 - Affinity group breakouts for deeper discussions
 - Best Practices:
 - Encouraging safe spaces for dialogue
 - Fostering cross-group collaboration

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- Having students set personal inclusion goals

1-Day Workshops

- “The Story We Share” – Personal Reflection & Bonding Workshop
 - Inspired by: Kairos Retreat, Peer Leadership Programs
 - Goal: Build deeper connections through storytelling and shared experiences.
 - Best For: Freshman orientation, leadership programs, student retreats
- “Bridging Differences” – Community and Connection Workshop
 - Inspired by: Diversity & Inclusion Retreats, Social Awareness Programs
 - Goal: Build empathy and friendships across differences.
 - Best For: Emphasizing community and connection.