The Heart of Arvada Table

Arvada High School, Jeffco Public Schools

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Operating within a district prioritizing student wellness, the Heart of Arvada combated rising youth mental health challenges by equipping students and adults with tools to foster trust and belonging.

Planning and implementation were a collaboration between Longer Tables, Jefferson County Public Health, and a diverse cross-section of Arvada High School, uniting sophomore, junior, and senior student leaders alongside school administrators, teachers, and support staff. The culminating event then welcomed local officials, businesses, school staff and students, and members of the greater Arvada community.

This practice centered on six 90-minute workshops for six student leaders to learn how to build authentic relationships. The curriculum emphasized servant leadership and explored "mask theory"—decorating physical masks to reflect images shown to the world versus what is kept hidden. The training helped build student confidence, public speaking skills, project management skills, and strong workforce readiness skills. Upon finishing the program, students received a certificate of professional growth. Driven by their training, the students created an impromptu addition to the initial plan: hosting a "mini longer table" during lunch, inviting classmates to eat with them using structured connection questions. By exhibiting the principles they learned, student leaders made an immediate impact, noticing isolated peers and reducing campus alienation.

The program culminated in a community capstone project where the student leaders planned and hosted a dinner gathering, with an initial goal of welcoming 120 guests and accommodating up to 150. This allowed them to foster social cohesion while aligning with the broader Longer Tables initiative to host 150 tables across Colorado, celebrating the state's 150 years of history through shared community meals.



Evaluation data was captured through student mask reflections and observation of their impromptu lunch event. A post-project debrief provided a greater understanding of the start-to-finish process. Future cycles were planned to formally evaluate impact through structured pre- and post-surveys to objectively measure long-term growth in leadership confidence, as well as increased impact on state/district surveys of school-wide belonging, and sustained campus psychological safety.

Challenges included coordinating youth-adult schedules, navigating initial hesitation regarding vulnerability, and coordinating community partners on such a short timeline. Future iterations would engage community partners much sooner to ensure that the needs of the table were met.

The organizers emphasized prioritizing relationships over logistics and starting early to build trust authentically. They recommended involving all participants in planning, implementation, and evaluation to foster engagement and sustainable outcomes. As one guest noted, creating space for connection sparked an immediate impact.