

The Circle of Power and Respect

You know the old saying, “Life is a box of chocolates”? Middle school can be like that. Kids come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, cultures, and tastes. A middle school can be filled with cliques and clans, but there is a time each day when we all melt together and form a united community. CPR is a time when friends and loners, students and teachers can all blend together and leave negative perspectives behind.

—middle school advisory student, Hudson, MA

THE CASE FOR STRUCTURE

Adolescents yearn to be free of the yoke of adult supremacy over what’s going to happen, when, and how. Even though students may balk and complain at first, ultimately what will save them from the pain of cliques, exclusion, fear, and mistrust, and will make their days at school both productive and enjoyable, is a structure designed to produce a climate of inclusion, safety, challenge, and fun.

CPR is the glue of our school’s project of community building; it’s where we feel safe and confident with ourselves and others. We share what we think and feel without being judged.

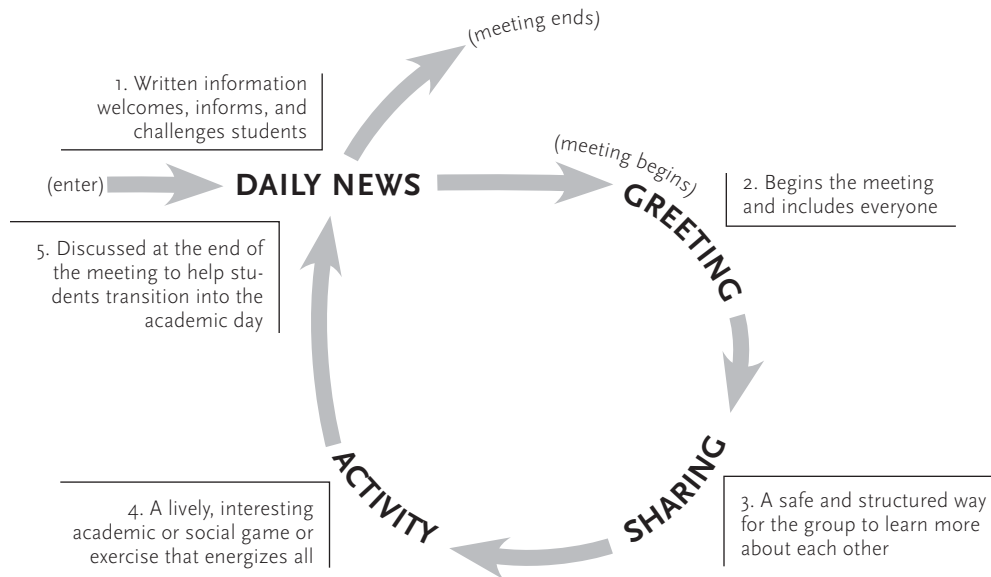
—middle school advisory student, Hudson MA

To create new realities in the face of old, hardened ones, we have to experience the difference. A new reality is unlikely to happen by accident, so the components of the Circle of Power and Respect advisory are structured to provide it. Using the structure every day, or at least three times every week, infused with variety and challenge, provides a steady and novel way to build social and mental muscle. Instead of hoping for serendipity, design intentionally!

A sixth grade teacher struggling to build community in her homeroom with a student population that was diverse, poor, and gang-oriented had trouble getting some students to sit beside others during CPR. The best days were days when, for the activity portion of the meeting, they played chair-changing games. For example, they played a game called Where Are You From? in which one person in the center of the circle asked people that question at random, and everyone answered with the name of any state except the state in which they all resided. When a designated person said, “I’m from Minnesota,” everyone had to take a new seat, including the person in the center. In the laughing scramble for a seat, gang affiliation slid away, and the students experienced themselves as a community. Every day, as they moved together through the structure of the four components of CPR, they enjoyed many opportunities to rise above their neighborhood exclusion code and reach towards each other.

—6th grade advisory, St. Paul MN

The Structure of CPR Is Designed to Meet Student Needs



The four basic components of the Circle of Power and Respect speak to the basic needs of young adolescents. There is room for many variations within the four components, but the predictable format provides safety and reassurance. The structure keeps the meeting intact and effective, even when playful or idiosyncratic variations are introduced into it. You can count on the basic format of CPR to maintain peace, build connections, and provide the practice in speaking, listening, and thinking that is crucial to social and academic success.

Predictable CPR Structure Makes Student Leadership Possible

Because the structure is clearly defined and consistently practiced, students learn it and gradually become capable of leading all four parts of the meeting. To lead well, they must exercise many social skills—especially responsibility, assertion, and self-control. Leadership of the meeting provides a superb opportunity for young adolescents to experience themselves as successful leaders. See page 93 for details about building the capacity for student-led CPR.