

5-Minute Written Check-Ins

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Marco Chacón

Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

A quick exercise can help teens reflect and make meaningful connections with their teachers.

By Marco Chacón

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Many teenagers will share things in writing that they wouldn't say out loud, and teachers can harness that concept to promote relationship building. The most outspoken, self-assured students may share openly from day one. Others may reluctantly participate in ice-breakers, carefully selecting ridicule-proof details: liking trending shows or video games, playing popular sports. Many come in with emotional walls up or are intellectually withdrawn—particularly those who have previously felt alienated or discouraged in school.

To build deeper, trusting relationships, and increase students' openness to coaching and guidance, we need to learn more about their lives, and that requires concrete strategies and ongoing routines. One such strategy that I found particularly effective throughout my 10 years of teaching high school and middle school social studies and Spanish was a form of written check-in. Here is how it worked and why.

Set up the Format

Every month or two, after holiday breaks, or when starting new units, I asked students to spend the first five minutes of class writing “a little bit about what has been going on with you, so we can touch base,” with the added assurances, “No pressure to share anything that you don't want to. I'm the only one who will read this.”

I gave lists of prompts to choose from, including targeted questions about interests, hobbies, and family and social life, such as “Things you've been doing, reading, watching (music, art, games, etc.)” “Good food? Nice visits? Relaxing time?” And more open-ended questions: “Anything big going on?” “Anything exciting, stressful, worrisome coming up?” “Highlights from the time off?”

Starting class with low-pressure, participatory writing tasks often boosts engagement. These questions are designed to accommodate varying levels of comfort with personal divulgence. The door is open for joyful gushing, thoughtful reflection, and vulnerability, but matter-of-fact, mundane responses are warmly accepted (and often quite informative) as well.

These check-ins also serve as informal assessments of writing skill, personality, and social networks and can be used as the basis for student groupings and illustrative lesson examples, such as political unrest as a push factor motivating mass emigration or descriptions of their favorite athletes, musicians, or authors to illustrate Spanish grammatical structures: “Beyoncé es talentosa, LeBron es talentoso.”

When I allude to a student's response, I don't attribute it to them explicitly in order to avoid potential embarrassment. If I'm certain that they like attention and being in the spotlight, then I identify them as a source of inspiration.

Model Your Responses to Prompts

As students finish writing, I share my own responses to the same prompts to humanize myself, increase buy-in, and promote desired norms and values.

I share pictures at Pride parades and emphasize my support for marginalized groups and diverse personalities, interests, and identities. I also discuss topics like playing nerdy board games, learning history by exploring ethnic enclaves, practicing French with Algerian soccer teammates, and laughing off mistakes in Turkish (e.g., “I’m a camel” instead of “I’m tall,” *devim* versus *deveyim*).

Videos of my baby daughter illustrate psychological concepts that students might be interested in, such as object permanence and preferential looking. I pass along my oncologist wife’s offer of medical-career-related guidance to aspiring future physicians and highlight our divergence from traditional gender roles: her superior handywoman skills, my cooking.

Appreciate Student Sharing

Students’ written revelations often start out guarded and gradually become more personal over the course of the school year. Less mainstream passions often show up in written updates before being mentioned out loud. I learn of proud achievements, special holiday foods, friends and romantic partners who grow closer or drift apart. They also share out-of-school routines like caring for siblings, tagging along to parents’ jobs, and hanging out at parks or mosques.

As trust grows, some students start requesting guidance: help choosing colleges, extra Spanish resources, exercise recommendations, or even how to ask a girl to the dance. Through written check-ins, my students have revealed their struggles and challenges that affect their academic and personal well-being: sleep deprivation from working late or hearing gunshots in their neighborhoods, hyperactive siblings distracting from homework, and debilitating anxiety around public speaking and test taking.

In some cases, pain expressed and cries for help are more extreme: distressing medical diagnoses, parents being deported, getting violently attacked by a neighborhood bully, and suicidal thoughts. With no school nurse or college counselor, and a social worker stretched paper-thin, I may be the only adult they tell.

Follow-Up With Students

Writing back to each student provides additional opportunities for teachers to reinforce values and encourage continued sharing:

- Students are positioned as experts: I express admiration and curiosity about their skills and knowledge that surpass my own: “I need to learn about cars from you.” “Drawing in anime style is really impressive! How did you learn?”
- Multiculturalism is celebrated: “Pozole is delicious!” “I went to a friend’s Eid dinner too—it was amazing.”
- I show compassion in response to negative experiences and shared excitement around successes, and I support them through challenges that they mention, such as test-taking anxiety and stage fright. This increases students’ self-efficacy and strengthens trust.
- Identified commonalities provide a natural basis for striking up informal conversations. For example, I get updates on language learning, siblings I used to teach, and athletes’ latest games, and we chat about favorite authors’ other books.

When invited, I attend performances, games, and celebrations mentioned in the written check-ins. I listen to the beat-maker’s latest project and watch the basketball fan’s recommended YouTube clips.

Sensitive information is discussed more privately, between classes, one-on-one. Possible concerns can be addressed and mitigated as follows:

- Given academic accountability pressure, administrators may worry about instructional time lost from content coverage. In reality, investing time in building student-teacher relationships has been shown to improve academic performance, rather than impeding it. Furthermore, connecting with mentors is essential to students’ future educational and professional success.
- Students may mention sexual, legal, or health-related matters deemed inappropriate for teachers to discuss and beyond their purview. In those cases, notify appropriate support staff, according to school protocols. Professional boundaries must be established, distinguishing warm support from casual friendship. Nevertheless, to address students’ issues and questions on these topics, we need mechanisms for finding out about them, and that requires open lines of communication with adults whom they can confide in.

Don’t Force A Connection

While it’s important to offer opportunities for connection with caring adults, we also must avoid forcing them. Not every student will choose to connect closely with a given teacher, and that’s OK. Written check-ins are not a panacea, but they do

increase the chances of meeting students' needs and positively impacting their lives. Getting to know students on a human level is often the most enjoyable, heartwarming part of teaching.