



# A Tool to Keep a Pulse and Shift School Culture

It all starts with a simple question. With a vision towards relationship building, school leader Tanis Griffin adopted the tool [Along](#), to emphasize connection among her entire school community at [Thompson Intermediate School](#). Along is a teacher-student connection builder that fosters authentic connections using simple, yet powerful reflection questions. At the start of her whole-school adoption of Along for school year 2021-22, Griffin said, “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.”

## Start with an Understanding of the State of Relationships

Taking an intentional approach to support their students emotionally, all students at Thompson began the year by taking a survey of their well-being. The survey revealed that many students were experiencing stress and difficulty relating to teachers, peers, and family. Griffin knew she needed to take action to support her entire school community. Griffin adopted Along to prioritize relationships in a consistent way.

Griffin shared, “My vision was, we’ve got to embed time in our school day to allow for relationship building. The first step was to talk to my staff about it and say, you know, everyone has been through so much uncertainty and trauma. Some of these kids have lost family members, some of them have been sick themselves, my staff included. They’re all in agreement that we need to really put some time and effort in building these relationships with kids.”

## Go All In: Whole-School Adoption of Along

Griffin went all in by adopting Along throughout the whole school. She was keenly aware that without a consistent approach to relationship development it would be challenging to move the needle. After training her staff, Griffin set clear expectations for the cadence of Along use. According to educator Kelli Moneyhun, “We use Along during our mentoring period in the morning. Along has given us the opportunity to introduce a communication tool that they can depend on to use every single week with their one mentor teacher.”

This unified front set the stage for success. Over the course of the school year, educators sent 1,268 reflection questions leading to over 9,000 response reflections and a 95% response rate by students.

## Start with a Simple Question

The Along library is curated with a set of research-informed questions designed to spark connection. According to educator Nicole Horne-Sherman,

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The icebreakers were really, really good. Questions like, ‘What is your favorite color?’, ‘What time of year do you like the most?’, just kind of break the ice showing them that, hey, this is an opportunity for you and me just to talk. And then you start asking some other questions that are serious about ‘How’s home, and how are you doing?’”

Knowing the many tasks educators balance, Griffin set a school-wide expectation that educators send an Along reflection question each Tuesday within their advisory group. By setting this clear bar, Griffin and her educators created a weekly relationship building routine; they fell into a cadence of connection.

## The Impact on School Culture & Relationships

Adopting Along across the whole school created space for consistent connection, invited all students to thrive, and initiated more open dialogue among students and teachers.

## Create Space for Consistent Connection

Thompson leadership and educators understood very clearly that knowing students are humans was paramount to their success. According to Moneyhun, “They’re happier to be here because they know somebody’s waiting for them. They know somebody wants to talk to them. They know somebody is going to check in with them. They know somebody is going to be involved in their presence here, so it’s really starting a culture change on campus.”

At the start of the school year, the impacts of disconnection caused by the COVID-19 pandemic remained at Thompson. Through

dedicated time in the advisory periods, educators kept at it. According to Horne-Sherman, “Students are now asking, ‘Have you read my message [on Along].’” And I’m like, give me a second I’m going to do it. I promise. Just knowing that I’m going to have [a new reflection] coming out and knowing that I’m waiting also for their response is just amazing.”

Small and large moments of connection accumulated into a culture focused on relationships.

## Engage All Students to **Thrive**

At Thompson, leadership and educators alike started noticing all types of students beginning to open up and share about themselves on Along. This began to impact in-person interactions as well. According to Moneyhun, “This student, she was new and teachers weren’t able to form relationships with her. She wasn’t really talking. But with Along, since it’s over software, she started building a relationship with her homeroom teacher immediately because she just doesn’t like to talk. She doesn’t have [verbal] communication skills yet, but she would write paragraphs and paragraphs and paragraphs on Along. It kind of opened a window for her mentor teacher to take what was happening on Along, and then bring that to a verbal conversation and really start opening up.”

The impact of Along was also noticed among students in special education. Heather Nielson, a special educator at Thompson, shared that Along supported amplification of the voices of her students.

“**This tool gives them a way to communicate how they are feeling in a really comfortable way,” she says. “You don’t always get to see that side of them. Sometimes they’re feeling more vulnerable and they want to share and they want to be heard.”**

Moneyhun further emphasized the impact on students in special education when she stated,

“We started using Along with these students and they love it because they get to record themselves, they get to do audio. It’s fun for them like a game. So, those teachers are able to connect with them in a way that they haven’t been able to before.”

## From Crickets to **Connection**

Among the many impacts of Along is a shift to more open connection between students and their teachers at Thompson. As Horne-Sherman put it,

“**[Along] has changed the dynamic of that home room unlike any other thing that I’ve seen. I’ve had homerooms that literally will be just crickets and they will not say a word. But this is different and it’s definitely added a new dimension.”**